Spillway

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

The working water

1

The last swim

The water was cold enough to make her teeth ache, and Ruth went in anyway, past the second marker rope, until the shelf dropped away under her feet and there was nothing to do but swim.

It was the last morning for it. She knew that the way she knew a bearing was going, without being able to say which sense had told her. The sun was not yet over the ridge, but it had reached the top windows of the upper houses, so that all along the north shore a row of small gold squares stood against the dark hill, each one a kitchen where somebody was coaxing a stove to draw. She lay on her back and looked at them. Smoke stood up from most of the chimneys in grey threads and leaned over at the top, and even from the middle of the reservoir the whole town smelled of green wood that had not wanted to catch.

"You're blue," said Patrick from the shore.

"I'm not blue."

"You've gone a sort of mauve round the edges."

"That's the light."

"It's very unkind light, then, on a woman of your years." She kicked water in his direction, badly, and swallowed some, and came up coughing. He laughed. He was sitting on the flat rock below the pump house with her clothes in his lap and the flask between his

boots, in his good coat with his hat pulled down against the cold. He had sat there the same twenty minutes every swim since June, and she had never once heard him complain of it.

She swam back along the shelf in the slow stroke that her knees allowed, with the dam on her right, a long grey slope of old concrete, the weed line on it a hand's breadth lower than it ought to be for the time of year. She did not look at it much. She looked at the station roof, the intake house, the wet black pipework, the thread of steam from the number one vent. The turbines were running. She could hear them from the water, a low steady sound that told her nothing except that they were running, which was what she wanted it to tell her.

She came out at the rock with her skin stinging. Patrick held the towel open at arm's length like a man at a bonfire, and she walked into it, and then into him, and put her cold face into his neck. He said something short about her feet. His coat smelled of woodsmoke and onions and the inside of a shop.

"Not on a rock, Ruth," he said into her wet hair. "I'm fifty-nine."

"You said that last year."

"I was right last year." But he did not let go, and for a minute neither of them said anything, and below them the reservoir moved against the stones with the small flat slap she had been listening to for thirty years and never once tired of. Somewhere on the upper road a door banged. Somebody was chopping kindling, badly.

"There's an egg," said Patrick.

"I know there's an egg."

"I boiled it at five and I'm not carrying it home. And there's bread, and there's the end of that cheese, and I put sugar in the tea, so don't start."

"I wasn't going to start."

"You had your mouth open."

She took the egg. It was still faintly warm from his pocket. She was peeling it, standing on one foot to get her sock on, when the alarm went.

It was the station alarm, the flat three-note bray that they had fitted after the winter the number two gate stuck half open and nobody noticed for a shift. It carried across the water and off the dam face and back from the hill, so that it seemed to come from everywhere at once, and every window along the north shore gave a small jump of light as somebody looked out. Ruth put the egg in her pocket. She pulled her work trousers on over her wet legs, which was a thing she had told herself for twenty years she would never do, and one boot, and the other, and stood hopping while Patrick held out her jacket by the shoulders.

"Go," he said. "I'll bring the flask."

"Eat the bread."

"I'm going to eat the bread, Ruth. Go."

She went up the path at the pace her knees allowed, which was faster than they liked, with her hair dripping down her collar and the egg knocking at her hip.

• • •

Ben was at the rail outside the control room with his hard hat pushed back and a red lockout tag in his fist, and he looked, she noted, extremely pleased with himself and trying not to.

"Number two," he said. "Position fault. It's isolated. I haven't been in."

"Good."

"I'm telling you I haven't been in. I stopped it, I locked it, I tagged it. I haven't put a foot past the rail."

"I heard you."

"I want it noted."

"It's noted." She looked past him at the board. Number one was carrying full load, its needle sitting where it ought; number two

stood at zero, a small amber lamp winking beside it. The control room smelled of wet wool and old cable. On the long bench by the door, one of the station lads was sitting in a soaked oilskin with his boots up, drinking tea, with the look of a man who has never in his life been told anything. “That’s the dry bench,” she said.

“It’s dry.”

“It was.”

He looked down at the dark patch spreading under him, and got up, and moved to the other bench, which was the wet bench, and was therefore permitted to be wet. Ben’s mouth twitched. She did not look at it.

“That’s my glove,” she said.

“It was on the hook.”

“It was on my hook.”

“I needed a good left,” said Ben, “and you’d gone swimming,” and held it out, and she took it, and put it on, and for a moment they stood there, two people in the same dull light, who had been told by everyone all their lives how alike they were.

The fault was not much. They went down to the gate gallery together, with the lockout between them and Ben a step in front, and he showed her without touching: the position follower on the number two gate, a little steel arm on a spindle that told the controller where the gate was. It had stuck in a dried pocket of old grease. The gate itself had moved when it was told to. The follower had not, so that the controller had been quite sure the gate was where it was not, and had done what controllers do, and screamed.

“It was in the pocket,” said Ben. “There. See the ring.”

“I see it.”

“I cleaned it, I didn’t grease it. I wanted you to look first.”

“Who greased it last?”

“Nobody greased it last. It’s on the monthly sheet.” He said it mildly, and she heard the mildness for what it was. “It was your month.”

"It was my month."

"You said you'd do the followers."

"I said I'd do the followers when the rain eased. It hasn't eased. I looked at it, Ben, I looked at it in the summer, it was clean in the summer."

"It was clean in June." He still did not look at her. "It's October."

She let that go. It was true, and nothing in it required an answer, and she took the grease gun from the shelf and did it herself, standing on the grating with the cold coming up through her boots and the wet trousers sticking to her thighs, working the nipple until the old black grease came out and then the new. Ben cleared the lockout. He did it properly, tag by tag, calling each one aloud as he had been taught, and she found that she was listening for the order, and that he had it right.

They ran the gate three times through its travel. It went smooth, and the follower went with it, and the amber lamp on the board went out. Number two came up under their feet with a long rising note and took its load, and the whole gallery changed pitch, as a room does when somebody comes in. Somewhere in the town, in the lower street, a machine would be filling again.

"Good," said Ruth.

"It was a good isolation."

"It was a good isolation. Write it up."

"I'm writing it up." He was grinning now, and could not help it. "You're dripping on my floor."

"It's my floor."

"It's a floor," said Ben, and went to write it up.

• • •

She did the gallery on her own, as she always did on a morning when something had broken, because a thing that breaks in one place has sometimes been getting ready elsewhere.

The drainage gallery ran the length of the dam near the foot, a low concrete tunnel with a curved roof and a gutter down the middle and a string of caged bulbs, of which about half were working. It smelled of rock and cold water. The drains came in from the left at intervals, each one a pipe stub in the wall with a standpipe and a gauge, and she walked along them with the book in the crook of her arm, as she had walked it every week for twenty-six years, reading what was there to be read.

Most of the gauges had died. They had gone one at a time over the years, the glass fogging, the needles sticking, a seal letting go, and she had replaced what she could and recorded the rest as failed. The east one, at the end, was the only gauge in the gallery that still agreed with itself. She cleaned its face with her sleeve and read it.

It was higher than she expected.

Not by much. By about the width of her thumbnail on the dial, from where the needle had sat in October of last year, and for a few moments she stood in the dripping light with the book open against her chest and tried to account for it. It had rained. It was an old gauge. It was in a wet place, and wet places made gauges lie. She tapped the glass, as one does, and the needle did not move, and she took out the pencil from behind her ear and wrote the date and the reading in the book, and beside it, smaller, *higher than Oct.*, and then, after a moment, a question mark that she would have to look at later and decide whether she had meant.

Then she wrote, on the facing page, Thursday, and under it, *east drain again*, and shut the book.

It was probably nothing. She had thought that about a great many things, over a great many years, and had been right about nearly all of them. She stood a moment longer, with the cold coming off the wall at her shoulder and the water ticking in the gutter, and found that she was thinking, clearly, of the egg in her pocket. She took it out and ate it standing up. It had gone cold, and it was very good.

• • •

There were people on the apron when she came out, in the thin new sun, in a loose, patient, slightly aggrieved knot. Two men from Martin's workshop in their dirty overalls. A woman she knew from the lower street with a pillowcase of something folded over one arm. The man who did the cold store's motors. They stopped talking when she came out, and then, all together, as if somebody had given a signal, they started again.

"Ruth, is it steady?"

"It's steady now."

"It wasn't steady at six. I lost a weld."

"There was a fault on number two. It's cleared."

"I've a load in," said the woman with the pillowcase. "I've a load of sheets standing in water. I've a woman collecting at ten."

"It's steady."

"Is it steady for the day?" said one of the men, and then, because he was not a bad man, and was tired, and it was cold: "Only I'd like to know when I can tell Martin. He's got the big job on, he's got people he's paying. If it's going to dip again—"

"It's not going to dip."

She heard herself say it. It came out easily, in the voice she used on the apron, a short plain voice with no hollows in it. The men nodded. The woman shifted the pillowcase to her other arm. The sun had cleared the ridge now and was coming down the dam face, and the wet concrete steamed.

"By noon?" said the first man.

"By noon," said Ruth.

They went away in twos and threes, talking about something else. She stayed where she was on the apron, with Patrick's flask on a wall somewhere behind her and her boots wet through, and felt her trousers cooling against her legs.

2

The lower street

The drum stopped in the middle of the rinse, with the soap still in it.

Helen heard it before she understood it: the long falling groan of a motor losing its argument, then the lamp over the sink going brown, then nothing at all but the drip from the rinse hose and a grey inch of water sitting in the bottom of the drum with four of the lodging house's sheets drowned in it. She stood with both arms in the second tub and a sheet half wrung, and looked at the clock over the door. It was nineteen minutes past seven.

"Mum?"

"It's all right."

"The light's gone."

"I know the light's gone. Finish your teeth."

She knew what it was. Every house on the lower street knew what it was. When the station lost a machine the feeder to the lower street dropped first, to keep the workshop and the upper houses up, and somebody at the station was supposed to throw the changeover back inside ten minutes, once the other machine had taken the load. It was a rule so old that nobody remembered who had made it. For years it had been Ruth's particular rule, and Ruth was not a woman who forgot a changeover.

Helen pulled the plug on the drum by hand, which meant kneeling, and the grey water ran out over the flags and into the gutter and the sheets lay in the bottom like something that had been shot. She dragged them out one at a time. They weighed three times what they had when she put them in. There was no way to run the drum without power, and no way to wring four double sheets by hand and still have an arm at the end of the day, so she took the two buckets from the hook and went out to the standpipe in the yard.

The cold was sharp enough to feel in her teeth. The standpipe gave its usual rust-coloured spit before it ran clear. She filled one bucket, and the other, and carried them in, one in each fist and her back set, thirty yards across the cobbles with the water slopping onto her boots, and her daughter stood at the kitchen door in her school pinafore with one shoe on, watching.

"Can I carry one?"

"You can carry the small one."

"I don't want the small one."

"Then you can carry nothing and put your other shoe on."

It took her forty minutes to rinse the sheets by hand in the cold tub, two buckets at a time, kneading them against the board with her sleeves rolled to the shoulder and the soap coming out in long grey strings, and at eight o'clock exactly, with her daughter's hair half plaited and a piece of bread in the child's fist, the lamp over the sink came back on without warning and the drum began, all by itself, to turn.

Helen looked at the clock. It said forty-one minutes.

• • •

She took her daughter to the schoolroom behind the chapel, at a walk that was almost a run, with the child's satchel banging against her hip and the child asking, quite reasonably, why she was holding her so tight. At the gate she let go, and tidied the plait, and was told that she was embarrassing. Then she walked back down the lane with her hands cold and wet and the sheets, still half rinsed, going round in the drum behind her like a mistake being repeated.

The collection round took the rest of the morning. She did it as she had done it for six years, with the handcart and the two canvas sacks, down the river road from the laundry to the last house before the bend, and back, calling at the doors in the order the houses came.

The first was the old man at the second bridge house, who lived alone above a cellar of dead machinery, and who came to the door in a cardigan with the buttons done wrong and apologised, as he did every week, for the step.

"It's a good step," said Helen. "It's a perfectly good step. It's only steep."

"It was a good step when I was sixty."

"You're not going to carry them down. I'll come up." She went up. The sheets were on the bed, folded in four, and the pillowcases on top, and under the pillowcases a clean shirt she had not been asked to take, which she took. The room smelled of damp wool and paraffin and the particular sourness of someone who did not like to open the window. "Have you had the hens in?"

"They're in. I put a plank. They're no trouble." He followed her down the steps one at a time with a hand on the rail, and at the bottom he said, in a voice that tried to sound as if it were an afterthought: "That was a long one this morning. The light."

"The station."

"Was it the station?"

"It was a fault on one of the gates. It's mended."

"Only I've the stove," he said. "The little one, the electric. I'd rather not be without it if it was going to go again." He paused. "I don't suppose anybody's said."

"Nobody's said anything," said Helen, which was true, and put the sheets in the sack.

The second house was at the bend, a square brown house with a tin porch and a tarpaulin over a yard of firewood, and the woman who answered it had a baby on her hip and the look of someone who has been awake since four. They had a generator, a good one, in a lean-to at the back, with the cover on. They had a quarter of a drum of fuel, which she had told Helen about in September, in the tone of someone confessing to a debt. She held out the sack of washing before Helen could ask.

"I can't do Friday," she said. "I'll have it by Friday week. I've to wait on Dermot's pay."

"It's all right."

"It's not all right. You've your own mouths."

"I'll take it now and you'll pay when you pay." She was already lifting it into the cart. She had said the same thing in August, and in September, and it had been paid in June, and it had been paid in a bag of onions, and in a sack of kindling, and once, memorably, in a hen. "And if the fuel's short, bring the baby's things down and I'll run them with the lodging house load. I'd rather that than you boiling them on the stove."

The woman looked at her. Her eyes were a little too bright. "You'll tell me," she said, "if it's going to be a bad winter. You'll know before we do."

"I won't know anything," said Helen. "I'm not my mother."

"No," said the woman. "You're the one that comes down the road."

She went home along the river with the handcart creaking and her shoulders aching and the bright cold water running beside her,

brown and quick between its stones, and found that she was composing a speech.

• • •

The lodging-house woman was at the laundry door at ten past ten, in her good coat, with her arms folded.

"They're still wet," she said.

"They're rinsed. They'll go through the drum again and they'll be dry by one."

"I've a woman collecting at ten."

"It's ten past ten."

"I'm aware it is ten past ten." She had a hard clean angular face and a way of standing as if the whole street were leaning on her. "I stood on the apron at the station at half past eight, and your mother said it was steady. She said it was steady, and that it wasn't going to dip, and I took her at her word and came down here to find forty minutes of grey water in the street."

"It was a fault on a gate."

"It's always something on a gate." She sniffed. "I'm not saying it's your fault, Helen. You know I'm not. I'm saying I've a business too."

"I'll take a third off."

"Half."

"A third, and I'll do your pillowcases for nothing, and I'll bring it round myself at one."

The woman considered this, with her eyes on the line of sheets slopping round in the drum behind Helen's shoulder. "Half the pillowcases," she said, "and I'll say no more." She went away up the street with her coat swinging. Helen shut the door and leaned her forehead on it, briefly, as one leans on a post.

• • •

She found Ruth at the station at noon, as she had known she would, standing at the long bench in the station workshop with a pump seal laid out on a rag and a piece of Patrick's bread in one fist.

Her mother was eating the bread as she did everything else, quickly and without noticing, in small bites between two actions, with her eyes on the seal. She had a smear of grease across one cheek. Her trousers were dark to the knee. Her hair had dried in wings. She looked, Helen thought, not unwell, only occupied, in a way that she had been occupied all Helen's life: absent without leaving the room.

"You missed the changeover," said Helen.

"I know."

"Forty-one minutes."

"It was a gate fault." Ruth did not look up. "I was in the gallery. Ben had number two isolated and I had to look at the follower."

"It's ten minutes, Mum. It's the first thing on the sheet."

"It's on the sheet for the person who's at the board."

"Then who was at the board?"

"Ben was at the board."

"And he didn't throw it."

"He had a fault to isolate." She turned the seal over with one thumb and examined the other face of it. "He's twenty-nine, he can't do everything at once. I should have set somebody on it. I didn't. It was a bad morning."

It was not an apology. Helen waited, with her sleeves still rolled and her hands red to the wrist and the smell of wet soap in her hair, and it did not turn into one. Ruth finished the bread. She wiped her fingers on the rag. She said, a little too brightly, "Did you get everything through?"

"No. I did four sheets by hand. I lost forty minutes and a customer and half the pillowcases."

"I can send Ben down to look at your feeder."

"I don't want Ben to look at my feeder." She heard her voice go up, and brought it down. "I want you to say that you were wrong. I don't want it fixed. I want it said."

Her mother looked at her, for the first time. It was a grey, tired look, slightly puzzled, like somebody who has been asked a question in a language she knew once. "I was wrong," she said. "I should have put somebody on the board." And then, because she was Ruth, and could not help it: "It'll be on the sheet for Thursday."

"That's not what I said."

"It's what I can do."

"It's what you always say."

They stood there in the cold light, on either side of the bench, with the little brass seal between them. She had come all the way up the hill with something in her chest she had been holding since seven, and now that she had put it down on the bench it had not got any smaller, and her mother had picked it up and put it on a list.

"I've to go," said Helen. "I've a load in."

"There's bread," said Ruth. "There's the end of the loaf. Take it for the child."

"She's had bread."

"Take it anyway."

She took it. It was a heel of bread with a thumbprint of grease on one corner. She put it in her pocket and walked out, and the whole of the long way down the hill she was aware of it against her hip, like a thing she had been given instead of something else.

• • •

It was nearly dark when she got the last of the lodging-house sheets folded and the lamps lit and the shutters across, and she went in through the back with her feet aching and her sleeves still damp and stopped in the kitchen door.

The table had been laid. It had been done with the greatest care, by somebody small and exact: three bowls in a row, each with a

spoon on the right-hand side and a piece of the heel of the loaf cut thin and set across the top of it, like a lid. The salt was in the middle. A jug of water stood by the lamp. The child sat at the end of the table with her feet not quite reaching the floor and her hands in her lap, in the pose of a person who has made a plan and does not wish to be seen waiting.

"It's supper," she said.

"I can see it's supper."

"I did it myself."

"It's very good." Helen came in. She put her bag on the chair, and her damp coat on the nail, and came and looked at the three bowls. "There's three."

"Gran might come."

"Gran's working."

"She might come after."

"She might." She sat down at the table. She picked up the bowl nearest the lamp, and the spoon, and looked into it, and put it down again, and then she took the third bowl from the end of the row, the one nearest the door, and carried it across the kitchen, and put it back on the shelf above the sink with the others, very carefully, so that it would not chip.

"It's all right," she said. "You can set it again tomorrow."

The child said nothing. She picked up her spoon.

3

A *customer waiting*

A long car the colour of the road came into the workshop yard a little after nine, with a trailer behind it, and a person got out with a canvas satchel and a long wet coat and asked where the machines were.

Ruth was crossing the yard with the follower bushing in her pocket and a note from Ben about the grease, on her way to ask Martin whether he could turn her a pair of sleeves by Friday. She stopped, because it was the sort of arrival that makes people stop. There was nothing about the stranger to explain it. They were of no particular age, in a coat that had been mended in four different colours of thread, with a pleasant tired face and boots that had walked a good way. They had already begun to unhitch something heavy and green from the trailer, alone, without hurry. People in the yard had gone on with what they were doing, in the way that people do when they intend to look later.

"The Tender," said Martin, coming out of the shed wiping his fingers. He did not say it as a question, or with any particular ceremony, and the Tender did not seem to expect more. "You've come about the Quarry's set."

"It dies after ten minutes," said the Tender. "It starts fine. It runs fine. And then it stops, and it won't go again until it's sat for an hour.

I've had the fuel off it twice and a new filter in. I'd like to know what it is, and I'd like it mended, and I've nowhere to sleep." They said it all in the same level voice, like a list of weather. "I can pay in work, or in coin. I'd rather work."

"We're full," said Martin. "We're running a job."

That was true. Ruth could see it from where she stood, through the open shed door: the big pump housing from the river works on its stand under the lamps, bare and gleaming, and three of his people crouched round it like a congregation, and beyond it at the far end of the shed, under a grey tarpaulin tied down at the corners, the shape that everyone in Alder Falls had been careful not to mention for six months. It was the size of a small cow. It had come on a flatbed from the district in March and cost, it was said, more than the workshop had earned in two years. Martin had borrowed against it. He looked at it now, briefly, as a man looks at a closed door he has a child behind.

"It'll sit," said the Tender, "till you've a gap."

"It'll sit," said Martin, "and Tessa can look at it when she comes in. If she comes in."

"She's here," said somebody, and she was.

She came in at the yard gate at ten past nine, at a kind of cheerful fast walk, in a pair of boots two sizes too large for her, with her hair tied up in a scarf and last night's pleasure still lying on her like a light powder. She smelled of woodsmoke and someone else's soap. She had a button done up wrong. Ruth knew exactly where she had been, because Patrick had mentioned it over breakfast: the dance at the old chapel, which went on, by tradition, until the lamp oil was gone.

"Sorry," said Tessa. "Sorry. I'm here."

"You're late," said Martin.

"I'm in the yard."

"You're in the yard at ten past nine in Pete's boots."

"They're better than mine." She looked at the Tender, and at the green thing on the ground, and with perfect simplicity abandoned the subject of her own lateness. "Is that the Quarry's? Does it die hot or cold?"

"Hot," said the Tender, and something in their face eased a very little, as if it had been asked a real question.

• • •

Ruth did not mean to stay. She stood in the doorway of the shed for a quarter of an hour, with the bushing in her pocket and the cold coming through her boots, and watched.

The girl did it well. She did not look at the engine at first. She asked how long it had run when it was new, and where it had been kept, and whether it had a hot spell in the summer, and what was done with the exhaust, and she got the answers in short sentences, and nodded at each one as if she were laying them in a row. Then she put her palm on the cylinder head, and took it off again, and said, "Run it."

They ran it in the yard, on a block, with the exhaust pipe pointing at the wall. It caught on the second pull and settled to a steady rough note, and everyone in the shed stopped what they were doing to listen. Tessa stood with her head on one side and her arms folded and her borrowed boots planted, and at the ninth minute, a little before it died, she said, "There," and pointed at something Ruth could not see.

It died at ten minutes. The yard went quiet.

"It's the lift pump," said Martin. "It's heat. I'll bet you the diaphragm's gone."

"It could be." Tessa did not look at him. She was crouched at the engine with a lamp, and her voice came out a little flat and a little careful. "It could be the pump. I'd like to look at the return line first, though. It's a good diaphragm sound till it isn't. This sounded more

like—" She stopped. Her mouth twisted. "It sounded like the line was getting hot and sucking air."

"It sounded like a pump."

"It might have."

She pulled the line off, and a little fuel ran out over her wrist, and she swore, softly and without any particular emphasis, and held her arm out from her body. She had used the wrong spanner. Ruth saw it. It was a half-inch on a nut that wanted the metric, and it had slipped, and rounded one corner of the flats, and Tessa looked at it for about a second and a half with an expression of such pure private disgust that Ruth nearly laughed. Then she put the spanner down, and took up another, and fitted it to the other two corners, and turned the nut on those.

"I rounded it," she said, to nobody. "That was stupid. I'll replace the nut."

"Leave it," said the Tender. "It's a nut."

"It's my nut now."

Something moved at the corner of the Tender's mouth, and Ruth, who had known Tessa for four years and had never once seen her admit a mistake aloud, felt her estimate move.

A man stood beside Ruth in the doorway, in a clean grey coat and good shoes, with a pair of wet bootcovers on over them, and a notebook. He was from the river works, from the covered side, and he had been standing there as long as she had. "She's good," he said, in a quiet voice. "How old?"

"Twenty-two."

"Is she bonded to him?"

"She's his apprentice."

"I've a yard at the district that's short of someone who can read a bore." He did not look at her. He was watching the girl's hands. "I'd not say it to Dyer. I'd not want to be rude to a man who's doing me a pump. But if she ever wanted a winter in a warm shed with a canteen, she knows where I am." He tucked the notebook into his

coat. “I’ve said it to her already. She hasn’t said anything. I thought you’d like to know.”

“Why would I?”

“You run the station,” said the man. “I thought you’d have a view on who goes.”

She had no view. She said so, and he nodded, and went to find his car.

• • •

The grocery was warm and dim and smelled of paraffin and onions and a great deal of cheese. Patrick was behind the counter with his sleeves rolled and his glasses on the end of his nose, weighing flour into a paper bag with the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He did it with extraordinary care, tapping the scoop on the edge of the sack so that the last grain fell in, and he did not look up when the bell rang.

“You’ve a customer,” said Ruth.

“I’ve got one,” said Patrick. “I’ve been looking at them for ten minutes.”

It was the Tender, sitting on a sack of lentils by the stove with a mug in both hands and the long coat steaming gently on a hook above them. They did not say anything. They were looking at the stove with the fixed, incurious attention of a person who has slept in a good many places and expects to sleep in another.

“I’ve told them about the back room,” said Patrick. “It’s got a damp wall and a short bed. The roof’s sound. There’s a stove if they bring the wood. I won’t charge for the first night. The soup’s extra.”

“That’s very kind,” said the Tender.

“It’s not kind. It’s the back room.” He tied the paper bag with a bit of string. “You’ll want soap. There’s soap, there’s a basin, and the girl upstairs will have a view on the water, so ignore her. You’ll want to be out before six. I’m not up before then and I’ll not be pleasant.”

“I’ll be out.”

"There's a dance," said Patrick, "in the chapel, most nights there's oil. You'll hear it. I'd advise cotton wool." He smiled at Ruth over his glasses, and the smile did something to the whole of his face, and she felt it low in her stomach, like something she had half forgotten and been glad to find. "Are you buying something or loitering?"

"Lamp oil."

"It's on the shelf. You've seen the shelf."

She took the lamp oil. The bell on the door rang as she was paying, and June came in on a gust of cold, with her bag over her arm and her scarf wound twice about her neck and the abstracted frown of someone doing sums.

"Ruth. Good. I wanted you."

"Hello, June."

"It's the school room." June put her bag on the counter. She was sixty-three, short and broad and slow, with white hair cut round a bowl, and she carried the keys to the common store on a loop of leather at her belt, so that they chimed when she moved. "I've eleven in the upper houses over seventy, and four with chests, and the Aldous baby. I've got to tell them something about winter, and I want to tell them something I can stand behind. Can you keep the school room warm through January? Can you keep the electric on in the upper road? Because if you can't I'll have to start moving them in November, and I'd like to know that before I've spoken to the Aldouses."

"It'll hold."

"It'll hold through January?"

"Through the winter." Ruth heard her own voice, level and quick and ordinary. "We've the headroom. We've had a bad autumn, we've had a fault on number two, it's mended. There's no reason we shouldn't run to spring. You can tell them that."

"Can I?"

"You can tell them I said."

June looked at her, over the top of the bag. It was a long measuring look, the look of a woman who has distributed a great many things to a great many people and been right nearly always. “I’ll tell them you said,” she said, and some of the strain went out of her shoulders, and Ruth felt it go, and felt it settle, quite lightly, on herself.

“Flour,” said Patrick. “Is it flour? It’s always flour.”

• • •

She went up to the gallery that night, after dark, two days before she had meant to.

She had told herself it was for the bushing. It wasn’t. She stood in the long concrete tunnel with the bulbs buzzing and the water ticking in the gutter and the cold creeping into her through her boots, and walked the whole of it, slowly, with the book under her arm, as she had walked it that morning. She checked the drains. She checked the weed along the foot of the wall. She stopped at the east end, in front of the only gauge that still agreed with itself, and cleaned its face with her sleeve.

It had not moved.

She had thought it might have. She had thought, on the way down, quite specifically, that the rain had stopped at noon and the lake had dropped a finger’s width since morning, and that the needle would have followed it, a few hairs, enough to say that the first reading had been a fluke of the weather. She stood in front of the gauge for a long time. The needle sat in the same place on the dial. It sat there with an air of complete indifference, like a man who has said what he came to say.

She wrote it down. She put the date, and the hour, and the reading, and under it, in her small upright hand: *same*. She looked at the word. It was a perfectly good word, and it was not the one she had wanted. She would have liked it to say lower. She would have liked, just for a moment, to be the sort of person who had been wrong.

She shut the book and climbed out into the dark. Somewhere down the hill somebody was playing a fiddle, badly, in the chapel.

4

The old measurements

The records were in four places, and none of them knew about the others.

Ben found the first in the cabinet in the control room, under the stove-lighting paper: the monthly sheets, ruled in his mother's square hand, a drain number down the left and a reading across the top, nine years of them in a folder that had swelled in the damp until it would not close. The second was in the old chief's blue ledgers on the high shelf in the intake house, which nobody had looked at since the old chief had died, and which smelled of dust and paraffin and something sweeter underneath. The third was a shoebox. The fourth was Ruth's head, and he was not going to start there.

He had cleared the bench in the records room on Wednesday afternoon, a long narrow room above the intake with one window, a hard chair and a view of the dam's grey shoulder, and laid the folders out in order. He had a pencil, a rubber, a ruler, three sheets of squared paper, and a flask of tea that Patrick had pressed on him at the shop door with the air of a man who had not been asked. He had the whole afternoon. He did not need it. It took him until dark.

It was not interesting work. That was the surprise of it. He had thought, when he began, that it would feel like detection, and it felt like housework. The old chief had read the east gauge in feet of

head, and his mother in the dial's own unlabelled marks, and in between there had been a year when somebody, probably the old chief's successor for six weeks, had read it in neither, and he had to sit with a conversion table and a cup going cold and turn each of them into the same thing before he could even begin to ask what they said. He threw out two years. The gauge had been replaced in the autumn of the second, and the new one read a shade high against the old, and the notes said so, in a tired line: *new gauge. Reads +. Allow.* Allow how much, the notes did not say. He drew a ring round them and put them on one side.

Then there was the pin.

It turned up in a note in his mother's hand, in the margin of the sheet for two summers back: *pin knocked by ladder, re-seated.* There was nothing else. It was the brass reference pin on the gallery wall by the east drain, the fixed mark from which the standpipe height was measured, and it had been knocked, and put back, and the readings went on. He read the note three times. He did not know how far it had moved. It might have gone nowhere. It might have gone a hair, or a thumbnail. He wrote PIN? on a sticky note and stuck it to the edge of the table, where he could not help but see it, and went on.

When the light failed he lit the lamp, and by the time he had finished the third sheet he understood that he was looking at something.

He sat back. He drew the sheets together side by side on the bench and looked at all three, and a cold small feeling began at the base of his skull.

It was not a spike. There was nothing in it that would have made anybody sit up. He had plotted each October reading against the lake level that week, one point a year, all on one sheet, and the points walked. Each year the east drain read a little higher for the same level of water behind the dam, and each year the difference was small enough to be the weather or the gauge or the way some-

body had held the pencil. His mother had compared each year with the one before. Of course she had. That was what you did with an annual sheet. Each pair of years was perfectly respectable, inside tolerance, with a line in the margin that said OK, and nobody had ever laid all the years side by side on one page and looked at the edge of the pattern, where it climbed.

He checked it. He did it again with the old gauge's years only, and then the new gauge's, and the slope was there in both. He did it with the pin's first reading and with an allowance for the pin moved a finger's width. The slope was there. It was shallower. It was there.

He went and stood at the window with his hands in his armpits and watched the dark come down over the dam.

• • •

The house was a skeleton with a roof on it, at the end of the third lane, and he had been building it for two years.

It had walls, now, and a floor of rough boards, and one room with a stove, and a kitchen that was a shelf and a sink, and four windows that had not got glass in them yet, only oilcloth tacked up with clouts. A lantern hung from a nail on the main beam. The air smelled of sawdust and woodsmoke and the damp new plaster he had slapped on the end wall in September, and in the lantern light the two people sitting on his upturned crates by the stove looked as comfortable as if it were a hotel.

"He's late," said Kit, from the cold store.

"He's on a slate," said Marit from the clinic room, who was peeling an onion into her lap. "He'll have a sheet of paper in his hand and a face like a curate. Hello, Ben."

"Hello."

"You look dreadful. Sit down. There's soup, and it isn't Patrick's, so you can be honest."

He sat down. It was good soup, with too much salt and a fatty bit of bacon in it, and he ate it out of a tin mug with the bread Marit

tore off for him, and for half an hour he did not think about the dam at all. They talked about the dance. They talked about the fact that Tessa, who had been declared a danger to the community by two separate women, had spent the night with Pete from the workshop, or had not, depending on the source, and had come into the yard in his boots. Kit had views. Marit had better ones. She told a long story, with gestures, about the clinic's new cupboard, and a man who had come in at midnight with a fish hook in his thumb, and the thumb, and a ruler. Ben laughed till he coughed. It was the first time he had done it in a week.

"Do you want the window done tomorrow?" said Kit. "I've the glass. I've a man who owes me, and he's cut it. It's all in the shed."

"Not tomorrow."

"Saturday?"

"Saturday." He looked at the oilcloth, bellying slightly in the draught, and at the black square of night behind it, and found that he wanted very much for it to have glass in it by winter, and that the wanting was a kind of pain. "Kit, if I told you the winter wasn't certain. The power. If there was a thing I wasn't sure of."

"Is there?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then don't tell me," said Kit, kindly, and picked up his spoon. "Tell me when you do. I'll put the glass in anyway."

• • •

He went to the gallery on Thursday morning, at ten to six, in the dark.

She was already there. He had known she would be. He came round the last bend in the long low tunnel, with his lamp swinging, and found her at the east end in her old coat and her wool hat with the book open in one arm, standing in front of the gauge with a pencil in her mouth. She was looking at it, not as she looked at things, quickly and then away, but with her whole face, with the long pa-

tient shut look of somebody listening to a bad noise through a wall. She did not turn round.

"It's the same," she said round the pencil.

"Since Tuesday?"

"Since Monday. I came back Tuesday night." She took out the pencil. "You've something."

"How d'you know?"

"You're carrying it like a cake."

He had the three sheets, folded in four, in the inside pocket of his jacket, and had been carrying one hand pressed flat against the place for the whole length of the tunnel. He took them out. He had meant to say something first, a speech, he had worked on it at the window for an hour. He gave them to her instead, and she held them under her lamp and unfolded them and read.

It took a long time. He stood and watched her face, which did not move, and the water went on ticking in the gutter, and somewhere above them in the dark the number one machine hummed on at its steady note, as it had hummed all his life.

"Octobers," she said.

"I thought you'd want like with like."

"Which gauge?"

"The old one to year nine, and then the new one, but I've done it both ways. There's a ring where I'm not sure." He heard himself speaking fast. He made himself slow down. "And there's the pin. You wrote it in the margin. You said it was knocked and put back, and I don't know how far it moved, and I don't think it matters to the slope, but it matters to how steep. I'd like to know. I thought you'd remember."

"I remember."

"How far?"

"I don't know," said Ruth. She was looking at the sheet. "It was a ladder. It was a Tuesday. I put it back where it looked right."

He waited.

"It's a trend," she said at last. It was not a question. She laid the sheet flat against the wall with her palm and looked at the line of points climbing across the squares, and he thought he saw, for a moment, something come into her face and go out of it again, like a light in a distant window. "It's a good sheet, Ben. It's well done. I'd not have thought of putting them on one page."

"You compared the years."

"I compared the years." She did not say it as if it were a defence. "It's what the sheet's for."

"It's not a thing you did wrong."

"I know it's not."

"I only thought—" He stopped. He had not meant to start there. "I only thought we should look at it. Together. Before I did anything. Before anyone— I haven't said a word. I haven't said it to Kit."

"No," said Ruth. She folded the sheets along their creases, carefully, and put them in the book, between two pages of her own handwriting, and shut it. "Give me forty-eight hours."

"For what?"

"To check the pin. To look at the drain. To see if it's the gauge, or the pin, or something I'm not remembering." Her voice was level and quick. "It's a trend. I'm not saying it's nothing. I'm saying I've not got a number I trust, and neither have you, and I'd rather not stand up in a room with something we can't stand behind."

"Forty-eight hours."

"Saturday morning."

"All right."

"You'll not say anything."

"I said I wouldn't." He heard the edge in it and tried to take it out. "I'll not say anything. It's two days."

She nodded. She looked at him, then, for the first time since he had come round the bend, with her grey tired level eyes in the lamp's small light. She looked as she had looked when he was nine

and had brought her a dead bird in a handkerchief, and asked whether it could be mended.

"Is that my glove?" she said.

"It's my glove."

"It's my good left."

"It was on the hook." He held it up, and the cold air came into the gallery between them like a thing with a face. "You can have it back."

"Keep it. It's yours now." She turned, and began walking back along the tunnel with the book under her arm. "Don't tell your sister."

"Helen knows where every glove is."

"That's true," said Ruth, and he heard her almost laugh. "Friday, then. Bring the paper. I'll bring the tea."

"You haven't got any tea."

"Patrick has good tea." Her voice came back over her shoulder, small and dry, down the long low tunnel with its dripping lamps. "Don't drink it all before I get there."

5

An available truck

The trouble with the truck was that there was only one.

It was Martin's, a flatbed with a cracked windscreen and a front axle that had not been quite true for two years, and it was driven by a lean silent man who had a quarter of a drum of diesel to his name and measured it out like medicine. Ruth wanted it for a day. She wanted it to go down to the district yards and come back with a pair of long-stem gauges and a coil of sounding line, which she could have asked for by radio and which would then have taken six weeks to arrive, and which she could not fetch herself because her own legs and a bicycle were not up to it. That was all. It was one day's diesel. She had gone to the workshop at seven on Friday morning with her cap in her hand to ask.

"No," said Martin.

He said it quite pleasantly. He was standing in the yard in his shirtsleeves with a mug of tea, watching two of his people ease a bored and polished pump housing onto a pallet, and he did not turn round.

"It's one day."

"It's one day I haven't got. That housing has to go to the river works by Tuesday, and he's taking it himself, and the truck takes him to the bridge, and the man's got a quarter of a drum and he's

already told me he's short." He sipped. "You can have it in a fortnight."

"I need the gauges now."

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to know a thing."

"You've the east gauge."

"The east gauge is the only one that works." She had not meant to say it so sharply. "That's the trouble, Martin. I've one instrument, and it's given me a number I don't care for, and I want a second. I've not asked you for anything. I've asked you for a day."

"You had it for six weeks," said Martin.

She stopped.

He did turn round, then. He had a square, weathered, handsome face, a good deal lined, and he was not angry. That was the thing she found hardest to bear about it. He looked at her with the terrible patience of a man who has been waiting for a reasonable time to say a thing and has found that the time has come.

"Two summers ago," he said. "The pump. You had the truck for six weeks, and the lad, and the hoist, and the use of my best fitter for a month. I'm not complaining. It was the pump. I know what the pump was. But the axle's not been right since, and I've not had the rest of that diesel back, and I never did get the payment, only a promise, and in onions."

"It was a good promise."

"It was a lovely promise." He smiled. "I'm only saying. I'll have you a day's truck when I've a day's truck."

"Martin."

"Ruth."

She stood there in the cold yard with her cap in her hand. She thought, without wishing to, of the summer: the long dry weeks with the lake low and the reservoir's edge cracked into plates, and the town pump, the old iron one in the pump house that fed the upper streets, going down with a groan on the first of July, its housing

split from end to end. She thought of the two jobs, both wanting the same truck. One was the pump. The other was the drain access, the iron door at the east end of the gallery that had stuck in its frame in the winter before and shut off the last forty feet of drain from anybody who might look at it. It was a week's work, with a hoist, to get it open. She had had one hoist, one truck and a handful of skilled people, and a hill full of people with no water.

She had chosen the pump. She would choose it again.

She thought of the ten days, afterward, while it was being rebuilt: the upper streets carrying water in buckets from the river, up two hundred steps, in July heat, the school kitchen shut for want of anything to cook with, June's women taking the carrying in shifts until one of them put her back out and another fainted at the standpipe. She thought of Patrick, standing in the back of the shop on the fourth day with the cold shelf gone warm and a face like a shut shop, throwing out forty pounds of cheese and a side of bacon and the whole of a week's butter. He had not said a word. He had gone on weighing flour. She had never forgotten it. And she thought, with perfect clarity, that if she had put the truck on the drain and left the pump, the town would have spent the same ten days, and the same ten after, and then a winter with no water on the hill, and no one would have forgiven her for it, and no one should.

"I know it was the pump," said Martin, gently. "I'm only saying."

"Fortnight," said Ruth.

"Fortnight." He raised the mug. "I'll think about the hoist."

• • •

She did the day's work, which was what there was.

She took the monthly sheet off its nail in the control room and did the followers, both of them, with the grease gun and a rag, on her knees on the grating, as she should have done in October, and it took her forty minutes and her knees hurt. She did the oil. She walked the intake with the book and a torch and looked at the trash

rack, which had a drift of leaves against it a foot deep and wanted raking. She raked it. A lad she had never been able to teach to read a gauge came to help and took the rake the wrong way round, and she took it from him, and then gave it back.

At eleven she isolated the east drain standpipe, at the end of the gallery, and drew it down.

It was not much of a test. It was the sort of thing she had done once a year for twenty years, to see how fast a drain gave its water back: you took a hand pump, and a bucket, and a watch, and you lowered the head in the pipe by so much and timed how long it took to come up. A good drain came up quickly. A sluggish one took its time, because the water was finding it harder to get through whatever was between. It had always been a rough measure. It was a measure of something, and she had never known quite what.

She used Patrick's egg timer, since it was the only watch she had that she trusted. She pumped the pipe down, and set the timer, and sat on an upturned bucket in the cold and listened to it tick.

It took a little longer than last year.

It was not much longer. It was a few grains of sand's worth. She wrote the time in the book, and sat looking at the number, and thought: it could be the pump, or the bucket, or the wind. It could be that I started the timer late. It could be me.

• • •

She went back to the workshop at half past two, because she had left the bushing sleeves on Martin's bench and had meant to collect them, and found the whole yard standing about.

The Quarry's generator was on its block in the middle of the yard with its cover off. It was running. It had been running, by the look of the little crowd, for some time, with a steady, slightly rough purr, and Tessa was crouched beside it with a lamp in one hand and a length of fuel line in the other, and a bracket, new and bright and clumsily bent, clamped to the frame.

"It was the line," she was saying. "It runs right along the exhaust, there, under the shield. See that? It's been cooking. It boils, and it sucks air, and it stops. It'd have been fine in winter and no good in summer, that's why it only died when it was hot. It's not the pump at all. The pump's fine. The pump's better than fine." She looked up. "I've rerouted it. I've made a stand-off, and I've wrapped it in the lagging, and I've moved the clip. It's been going for an hour. I didn't want to say till it had."

"Has it died?" said the Tender.

"It hasn't died."

The Tender was standing at the edge of the yard in the long mended coat, with their hands in their sleeves, looking at the engine. They did not look at Martin, who was standing a little way behind with his arms folded and a face like a closed door. They did not look at anyone. They looked at the bracket, and the line, and the girl.

"It's your diagnosis," they said.

"It's my guess."

"It's a good one." They crossed the yard. They crouched, with a small grunt, and put two fingers on the line where it had run beside the exhaust, and took them away again. "I'd been looking at the pump for a month." Something moved at the corner of their mouth. "You'd think I'd have looked at a pipe."

"Mr Dyer said it was the pump," said Tessa, with her eyes on the engine.

"Mr Dyer was entitled to." The Tender stood up. "I'd like to take it as it is. I don't write things down. I'll keep the stand-off the way you've made it, in my hands. That'll do."

"It's my shed," said Martin.

It was said quietly, in a tight, reasonable voice, and nobody laughed. The Tender turned and looked at him. It was the first time they had done it, and they did it for some time, with the same polite, tired, incurious attention they had given the engine.

"It's her bracket," they said.

There was nothing to be said to that. Martin said nothing. Tessa bent her head over the engine with her face a flat, careful, pleased mask, and Ruth, who had stood at the back with her hands in her pockets and the cold in her teeth, saw that the girl's ears had gone scarlet. She turned and went to find her sleeves.

• • •

Patrick was standing in the kitchen in his shirt, with a wooden spoon, when she came in. He had a pan on. The room smelled of onion and fat and the sharp green smell of the bay leaves he grew in a pot on the sill, and the window was running with steam.

"It's the dance tomorrow," he said, without turning round.

"Is it?"

"It's Saturday. There's a dance. It'll be the last of the good nights, they say it's going to turn." He stirred. "I thought we'd go."

"I've a thing in the morning."

"In the morning. It'll be over by the evening, surely, whatever it is." He turned his head. He had flour on one cheek, and his glasses had steamed, and he looked at her over the top of them with an expression that she had known for thirty-five years and had never learned to resist. "I'd like to dance with you, Ruth. I haven't since June. You stood on my foot in June and I've been waiting for the apology."

"I didn't stand on your foot."

"You trod on it with intent."

"I can't promise."

"I'm not asking you to promise a thing. I'm asking for a Saturday." He put down the spoon. "I've been making a stew for a week for people who don't say thank you, and I've a wife who's been sleeping in her boots since Monday, and I'd like, just for an evening, to be in the same room as you with nothing on the table."

"Patrick."

"I know. You've a thing." He smiled. It was a very small smile, and it cost him something. "I'm not going to make you. Only—say you'll try."

"I'll try."

"That's a no."

"It's a try." She went and put her arms round him from behind, with her face against his shoulder and the smell of onions and bay and clean cotton in her nose, and he stood quite still under it, and put his floury hand over both of hers. "I'll try. I will."

"You'll try." But he leaned back against her, a little, as he had in June.

• • •

She sat at the table afterward with the sheets spread out under the lamp, and the cold stew going stiff in its bowl, and read them again.

It was a quarter to eleven. Patrick had gone up. She could hear him overhead, the long slow creak of the boards as he turned, and the bed. She had the east drain sheets and the plot Ben had made, the three ruled squares with their line of points walking steadily up and to the right, and she had a pencil, and she put her finger on the pin.

Two summers ago. A ladder. She had put it back where it looked right.

Suppose it had moved. Suppose it had dropped, a hair, a thumbnail, into the wall. Then every reading afterward would have been measured from a mark a little lower than the old one, and every reading afterward would have come out a little higher, by exactly that much, and no more. It wouldn't be a slope. It would be a step. One step two summers ago, and then flat.

She took the pencil. She marked the sheet where that summer fell, and looked at the points on either side.

Before it, the points sat low and nearly level. After it, they sat higher. She could see it. She could see it so clearly that she

wondered how she had not seen it from the first, and a long slow warmth went through her, like a drink on an empty stomach. It was a step. It was one step. It was a thing she had done, with a ladder and a wrong thumb, and it was a thing she could put right in an afternoon.

It was not the whole of it. She knew that. The last two years went on climbing, a little, after the step, and the egg timer had said what it had said. But those might be the gauge. They might be the weather. They might be anything at all.

She wrote *step*? in the margin, in pencil, small, and looked at it. She rubbed out the question mark. She wrote it in again, more lightly. Then she sat there in the circle of lamplight with her hands round the pencil and her mind going over it, once, and again, and a third time, as one tries the same door in the dark, and she found that she wanted it to be true so much that it frightened her.

6

Forty-eight hours

Ben had taken a level line down from the crest mark on Friday afternoon, and the pin had moved.

They had missed the Friday tea; she had been at the drain and he on the crest, and neither had sent word. He told her on the gallery steps at six on Saturday morning, in the dark, with his breath standing in front of his face, and he told it badly. He had written it down and then folded the paper and forgotten to take it out of his pocket. He said it three times in three orders. In the end she took the lamp out of his hand and held it up to his face and said, "Say it once."

"It's lower. The pin. It's lower than the sheet says it should be, by a few millimetres. I ran it twice, from the crest, and it came out the same both times." He swallowed. "So it did move. When the ladder hit it. It went down, and you put it back, and it didn't come all the way back up."

"How many millimetres?"

"Three. Three and a bit."

"Is that enough?"

"It's enough to make a step." He did not look at her. "I did it again with the step taken out. I put the sheet on the table at midnight and redrew it. It's not as steep as I said. It's about half."

"Half."

"About half. The first part of the climb is the pin. The rest isn't." He took out the paper, at last, and unfolded it, and held it under the lamp, and she saw that he had drawn it neatly, in two colours, with the step marked in red. "I got it wrong, Ruth. I told you it was a trend. It's a trend and a mistake. I'm sorry. I should have asked about the pin before I came to you."

"You did ask."

"I asked after."

She took the sheet. She had known, since the kitchen table, what it would say, and it said it. A step. There it was, in his careful red, two summers back, as plain as a stair, and she felt the same slow warmth she had felt last night go through her chest and into her arms. It was true. It was a thing she had done with a ladder and a wrong thumb. She had been right to think it, and Ben had checked, and it was so.

"It's good," she said.

"It's not good."

"It's better. It's half what you thought. That's a long way from a drain failing."

"It's half what I thought." He said it with a flat careful emphasis, as one lays a plank across a hole. "It's not nothing. The last two years still go up, after the step. Look." He put his finger on them. "It's a small slope. It's there with the old gauge and it's there with the new. It's still going the wrong way."

"It could be the new gauge."

"I've done it both—"

"It could be the rain. We've had two bad winters. It could be the pump summer, with the lake as low as it was, and the soil drying out round the drain." She heard her own voice, quick and level, laying one thing on top of another, and could not stop it. "It could be a great many things. I'd like to see it through the month, Ben. Until the rain's been and gone. We've a gauge, we've the egg timer, I'll get

the long-stems from the district when Martin's truck's free. Three weeks. Four. We'll know what it is."

"Four weeks."

"Three and a bit."

"That's the whole of November."

"Then it'll have rained, and we'll know."

He said nothing. He stood on the steps with the paper hanging from his fingers and the lamp's small light on one side of his face, and she saw it happen: nothing dramatic, only a slow settling of the jaw, the look of someone who has put a sum down in front of another person and been told it will be looked at later. He folded the sheet along its creases. He put it in his pocket.

"You said forty-eight hours," he said.

"I said forty-eight hours for the pin."

"Yes," said Ben. "You did."

• • •

Patrick had done the whole of it with the good glasses.

She saw it as soon as she came in at half past six: the cloth on the table, the real one, the cream one with the darned corner, and the six glasses he had bought off a barge in a good year and kept in the dresser wrapped in a pillowcase. They were thin and green and slightly lopsided and he took them out twice a year. The lamp was lit. The stove was drawing well. On the sideboard stood a dish of baked apples with their skins split and a smell coming off them of cloves.

"I asked Ben," said Patrick. He did not turn round. He was dressed in his clean shirt and had put something on his hair. "I sent the Aldous boy round. I said it was supper. I said if he'd any manners he'd come."

"You said I'd be at the dance."

"I said you'd try." He bent and opened the oven door and looked in. "It's a chicken. It's a very good chicken, I've been standing over it

since two, and I'd like to eat it with the two people I care for most. And then I'll go to the dance by myself, and stand at the back, and be a dignified widower."

"You're not a widower."

"Tonight I'm practising."

Ben came at seven, with a bottle of something from the cold store, wearing his good jacket and a clean shirt and the look of a man going to a funeral that he suspects will become a wedding. He kissed Patrick on both cheeks, awkwardly. He did not kiss Ruth. He sat down in his old chair, the one with the broken rung, and picked up a green glass, and turned it in his fingers so that the lamp shone through it.

"These are the good ones."

"I know," said Patrick, cheerfully, "I'm a man of resources."

They began quite well. That was the thing she would remember afterward. For twenty minutes, over the chicken, with the apples waiting and the stove ticking, they were a family at a table, and Patrick told a long story about the Aldous boy and a rat, and Ben laughed at the end of it, and passed the bread without being asked. She put her foot against Patrick's under the table, and he did not look at her, but she saw his ears go pink.

"Tessa fixed the Quarry's set," said Patrick. "Did you hear?"

"Pete was telling me."

"Pete tells everybody everything, he's a leaky bucket. It was the pipe." He cut himself a piece of chicken. "Martin took it very well. He went an extraordinary colour. I think it was the first time a customer's ever told him it wasn't his shed."

"It was her bracket," said Ruth.

"It was her bracket," said Patrick, with great satisfaction.

"Ben corrected his sheet," said Ruth.

She had not meant to say it. It came out in the same cheerful voice, the dinner-table voice, and fell into the room like a spoon into a bowl. She felt Patrick stop with his fork in the air.

"I corrected my claim," said Ben, after a pause.

"It's a very good correction. He found the pin. He was quite right to check it. It's half what he had."

"It's half what I had."

"Which is something."

"Is it?"

"It's a good deal." She put down her knife. "I'm only saying it's the right direction, Ben. It's a step and a bit of slope, and the slope may be nothing, and we'll see it through the month."

"You said forty-eight hours to check if it was nothing." His voice had gone thin, and he was looking at the glass in his fingers, with his shoulders high and rigid, like a man trying to carry a tray. "It isn't nothing. I did what you asked. I came to you first. I haven't said a word to anybody, not to Kit, not to Marit, I've had it for three days like a stone in my shoe. And you want another three weeks. And in three weeks you'll want to see what the frost does. And in January it'll be the thaw."

"That's not fair."

"It's not fair. I know it's not fair." He put the glass down. It was very quiet. "I'd like it to be fair. I'd like to be sitting here saying you're a careful woman and it's a careful thing. I'd like that more than anything."

"Eat your dinner," said Patrick. "Both of you. Please. I'm not going to ask again, I've a chicken, it's going cold, and I've a pair of children who have not got the faintest idea how to sit in a room."

"I'm not a child."

"No," said Patrick. "You're worse. You're competent." He pushed the dish toward Ben. "Have some potato. Ruth, tell him you'll talk about it in the morning."

"We'll talk about it in the morning."

"That's not what I'm asking." Ben pushed back his chair. It scraped the boards, with a long sound that went through her teeth. "I'm asking if you'll sign it. The winter sheet. The continued operation.

You've to sign it by the first, and I'm asked to countersign, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know if I can put my name under it. I want to know if you're going to put yours."

"I don't know."

"Then I'll not eat."

"Ben—"

"I'm sorry, Dad. It's a very good chicken." He stood. He had gone very white and very formal, and for a moment he looked so exactly like her own father that she nearly said so. "Thank you for the supper. I'll see you in the morning. At the station."

He went. They heard the door shut, with a gentleness that was worse than a slam, and his boots go away on the cobbles, quickly, and a long way down the lane, stop, and start again.

Patrick sat looking at his plate.

"I had a chicken," he said, after a time.

"I know."

"I had apples." He looked at the dish, at the dark split skins and the cloves, and she saw his face move. "You told him three weeks."

"I said we'd see."

"He heard three weeks."

"He's not a child, Patrick."

"He's your child." He did not say it angrily. He said it quite gently, as one says a thing that is a plain fact, and she found that it was worse. "I'm not going to the dance. I thought I might. I find I don't want to practise." He got up, stiffly, with his hand on the table, and began to stack the plates. She said leave them. He said he would, and did not.

• • •

He went up at ten. She stayed.

She stood at the sink in the lamplight with her sleeves rolled to the elbow, and the hot water running, and took the good glasses one by one from the table, six of them, and washed them. They did not

need it. They were clean. Only Ben's had been used, and the other five had stood untouched at their places, and she took each one and rubbed it with her thumb and rinsed it and held it up to the lamp so that it shone green, thin and fine as breath on a window, and put it on the cloth to dry.

In the morning he would be at the station. He always was. He would come in at six with his hat pushed back and the red tag in his fist, and say good morning, and they would do the followers. It was a Saturday, and then a Sunday, and the work did not know about either. They would stand in the gallery together, and she would hand him the lamp, and the thing would simply go on. She was quite sure of it. She told herself so, again, while she dried the sixth glass with the cloth.

The winter sheet lay on the dresser where she had left it on Monday, in its buff folder, with the pen laid across it. It had been there all week. It was a single page, ruled, in the old chief's printed form: *Continued operation, winter, certified by the station chief.* Under that a long clean empty line, and at the foot of the page another, shorter, for the countersignature.

She did not look at it. She hung up the cloth. She stood for some time with her hands in the cold water, and then she took them out and dried them, one finger at a time, and went and put out the lamp.

PART TWO

What people hear

7

The workshop hears

Number two came out for its new bushings at six on Monday morning, and by eleven Ben had stopped pretending it would go back in by noon.

The sleeves were Martin's, turned in the workshop on Friday, and they were very nearly right. That was the trouble. Very nearly right, on a follower spindle, meant a rattle in the first week and a bind in the second, and Ben had put the second sleeve in and taken it out three times, on his back on the grating with a lamp in his teeth, trying to decide whether he was being fussy. He knew his mother would have called it fussy. He also knew she would have fitted it, and gone home, and been right nine times in ten. At eleven he put the file down and went to find a rag.

The station lads had found out. They always did. By half past eleven two of Martin's people were standing in the control room door in their grey overalls, with that careful look of men who have been sent to ask a question by somebody who would not ask it himself.

"We've one lathe up," said Pete, who was thin and brown and perpetually amused, and was not amused now. "Martin's rationed it. It's the big job, it's due at the bridge tomorrow, and I've a man standing at a dead machine with his arms folded. How long?"

"It was meant to be a shift."

"It's been a shift and a half."

"The sleeves are a hair out." He heard how that sounded. "I'm not putting a thing in that I don't trust. It'll be two more hours. Three."

"Is it only the sleeves?" said the other man.

He was older, quiet, a big greying person who ran the boring bar and had never in Ben's hearing asked for anything. He said it flatly. He was not looking at Ben but at the board, at the dead amber lamp beside number two, and Ben saw that the question had been put to him in the plainest possible way and that he could answer it truthfully or not.

He had been telling himself since Saturday night that he would wait. He would wait until he and his mother had stood in a room and agreed on what to say. He had told himself it on Sunday morning, at the followers, with her silent beside him and the sheet between them unsigned on a dresser a quarter of a mile away. He had told himself, with some firmness, that a person could be honest and also patient, that the two were not in competition.

"No," said Ben. "It's not only the sleeves."

They waited.

"I've been through the old drain sheets. There's a trend on the east drain, climbing for years. I had the size wrong, it's about half what I said. It's still going up." He said it fast. "I don't know what it means. It might be the gauge. I want the drains looked at before winter, the far end, where the door's stuck. I've not— I haven't said I'll sign the winter sheet. I've said I can't yet."

"You're saying the dam's—" said Pete.

"I'm not saying the dam's anything. I'm saying I can't countersign it without somebody looking."

"Does Martin know?"

"No. It's—nobody knows. My mother knows. I wanted to wait. There's going to be a meeting, I'll ask June, and we'll all—" He stopped. They were both looking at him with a kind of grave courtesy, as at a man giving directions to a place they intended to avoid.

"Don't say anything. Please. Not till we've talked it through. It's only so everyone hears it the same."

"Right," said the older man.

"Aye," said Pete, rather slowly.

He went back to the sleeves. He did not trust himself with the file.

• • •

Pete passed him in the lane at ten past two, going the other way at something near a run.

Ben had come down for the second sleeve, which Martin's lad had promised him re-turned, and he was walking along the bottom of the upper road with a paper bag in his hand when he saw him: thin, brown, bare-headed, his overalls half unbuttoned, going down toward the schoolroom behind the chapel at the stiff fast walk of a man trying not to be seen to run. Ben called out. Pete did not turn his head. He took the corner by the chapel wall and was gone.

He stood in the lane with the bag and watched the corner. He thought: he's only gone for his lad. A man can fetch his lad. It does not mean anything.

It was the grocery that told him it did.

He went in for tea, because he had not had any, and the bell rang, and the whole shop turned. There were six people in it. They were not buying. They were standing in a loose half circle by the stove, with the particular lowered voices of people who have been telling each other something, and when Ben came in the voices stopped. Patrick was behind the counter with a face that Ben had known all his life and had never seen like this. It was blank. It was a shut shop.

"Tea," said Ben.

"There's a pot," said Patrick.

He poured it. Nobody spoke. A woman near the stove, from the upper road, with a toddler on her hip, said, in a voice with the strain of ordinary politeness, "Is it true, Ben? About the dam?"

"It's not true," said Ben. "It's not anything. I said there's a trend on a gauge—"

"Pete's wife says you said the winter's off."

"I didn't say that."

"She says you've refused to sign."

"I said I'd like someone to look at the drains."

"Which is a no," said the woman, quite gently. "Isn't it? If you'd like someone to look at a thing, and you won't sign for it, that's a no." The toddler had begun to cry, in a thin tired way, and she shifted it to her other hip. "I've a mother in the back room who can't do stairs. I've got to know whether to move her. I've got to know before it gets cold. I'd like to know what I'm being told."

"You're not being told anything. I'd like everybody to hear it properly, there's going to be a meeting."

"When?"

"I don't know. I'll ask June."

"Then I'll go and ask June," said the woman, and went out, and the toddler's cry went away down the street.

Patrick said nothing. He took Ben's cup, and refilled it, and set it down on the counter exactly in the middle of the ring left by the last one.

"I didn't say it like that," said Ben.

"No," said his father. "I don't suppose you did." He wiped his hands. "It doesn't much matter how you said it, love. It matters how it went."

• • •

It went all afternoon. Ben saw it go.

He saw it in the workshop yard at four, where Martin stood in front of the grey tarpaulin with his arms folded and his face like a man listening to music he hated, and a man in a clean grey coat with a notebook was saying, quite courteously, that he was sorry, that it was only a precaution, that his people were cautious by nature. It

was the man from the river works. He had come back for his housing a day early. He was giving the month's order back with the exquisite politeness of someone declining a second helping, and Martin said, "It's a month's work. I've a machine under that sheet that I've borrowed on the strength of it," and the man said, "I understand, Mr Dyer. When there's a certificate, I'll be glad to come back."

Ben turned round and walked the other way. He did it quickly, with his shoulders up. He was not quick enough.

"Ben."

Martin had come across the yard with the man's empty cup in his hand. He did not look angry. He looked at Ben for some time, and Ben waited for it.

"You told them, then."

"Pete. And the man from the boring bar. I didn't mean—"

"I know what you didn't mean." He turned the cup over. "That's a month's order. I'd rather know. I'd have been told in March if I was lucky and in the spring if I wasn't." He put the cup in Ben's hand. "Don't go round saying sorry. Go and fetch my sleeve. You owe me a sleeve."

Ben stood holding the cup. It was the kindest thing anyone had said to him all day, and it had cost Martin a month's order.

• • •

Marit found him at nine.

He was sitting on the steps outside the clinic room, in the dark, with his back against the post and a cold cup beside him, and she came out in her apron with her sleeves rolled and sat down next to him without a word. She smelled of carbolic and tea. She looked, he thought, as tired as he had ever seen anybody look.

"I've four in," she said. "There's a bed and a half. I've put the old Aldous grandmother in the supply cupboard on a mattress, because it's the only room with a door that shuts, and a man from the bottom houses is in my chair with a bad chest and a blanket, because

his daughter moved him up to the room over the cold store, and she didn't know it hadn't got a stove."

"Oh, no."

"He's quite all right. He's only cold, and furious, and he's coughing, and I've told him to stop being a martyr." She put her head back against the post. "That's three houses that've moved somebody. They've gone into rooms nobody's looked at. There's a lad in the schoolroom loft that's going to have a very bad night, and a woman who's put her mother in a partitioned bit of the store where I'm fairly sure the flue's cracked. I've told June. She's gone round with a candle." Her voice stayed even. "It's only a night, Ben. They're not hurt. They're only moved."

"I didn't tell anybody to move."

"I know you didn't."

"I said there's a trend."

"I know what you said." She turned her head, and looked at him in the light from the clinic door, kindly. "You said it to three people at noon, and by two it was everyone's mother. It's not your fault. It's only what it does."

He said nothing. He looked at the dark lane, and the windows lit all down it, far more of them than there should have been at nine, small and yellow and wide awake, the whole town sitting up in its kitchens with its coat on.

"I should go and see June," he said.

• • •

She was at her own table, in the room behind the common store, with a lamp and a ledger and a mug she had stopped drinking from, and she did not look up when he came in. She was writing. Her white head was bent, and the bunch of keys lay on the table by her elbow, and the pen made a small dry sound on the page.

"Sit," said June.

He sat.

"I've nineteen in the schoolroom and the loft, two of them moved twice. I've a man with a heart who wants to be with his sister at the bottom end and I've said no, and he's been shouting at me for an hour." She did not raise her voice. "I've been told Pete's wife says you won't sign. I've told forty people it's a precaution. Against what?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are." She put down the pen and looked at him. She was sixty-three and had been awake since five, with a thin stripe of ink on her wrist, and her eyes the colour of old tea. "One thing, Ben, and think before you answer. I've people up here who've moved and people down there who haven't, and I've been so busy with the first lot I've not thought about the second." She tapped the ledger. "Which of the houses on the river road have been warned?"

He opened his mouth.

Helen's house was on the river road. And the old man at the second bridge house, with the step and the hens. And the woman at the bend with the baby and a quarter of a drum of fuel. And the Aldouses' married daughter, and the two cottages beyond the bend, and whoever it was who lived in the lean-to by the ford. He knew them all. He had been in half of them. He had been to every one of those doors with something to mend, and he had talked to the people in them about the dam in the tone of a man discussing the weather in a different country.

He had told three men in a control room. They had told the town. The town had told itself. And it had all gone upward, up the hill, to the school and the loft and the room over the cold store, to the people who were near enough to hear it, and not one word of it had gone down the road.

"None," said Ben.

"None," said June.

"I'll go. Tonight. I'll go now—"

"It's ten o'clock." She picked up the pen again. "You'll frighten them to death. You'll go in the morning, with Helen, if she'll have

you." She did not look up. "I'd like you to be sure she hears it from you first. Not from a customer."

She wrote something in the ledger. After a while he understood that he had been dismissed, and went out through the store in the dark, past the bins, and shut the door behind him.

8

A *seat already found*

"Are you going?" said the lodging-house woman.

Helen had the drum half loaded. It was twenty past eight on Tuesday, and she was kneeling on the flags with an armful of the Aldous baby's things, the little vests with the shoulder buttons that had to be washed apart from everything else, and she did not at first understand that the question was for her.

"Going where?"

"Wherever it is." The woman stood in the door with her good coat buttoned to the neck and her arms folded over a bag of mending. She had not come in. She was looking at the drum, at the soap, at a line of pegs along the wall, at anything but Helen's face. "I'm not being nosy. I've three guests Thursday, a man and his two boys, coming up from the district for the weekend, and I'd like to know whether I've a laundry. I'd like to know if it's worth me putting the sheets on."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That there's a truck." The woman looked at her at last. She had a hard, clean, angular face, and it was not hard now. It was uncomfortable. "That your mother's put you on a truck. You and the child.

That it's all arranged, and it goes Thursday, and it's only family. I said that's a lie, Helen would have said. I said she'd have said something to me, I've been her customer six years." She waited. "I'm sorry. I only wanted to hear you say it."

Helen put down the vests.

She had heard about the dam at six that morning, from the milkman, who had it from the baker, in four different forms before breakfast. She had given the child her porridge and walked her up to the schoolroom through a town in which nobody was looking at anybody, and had said nothing, because she had nothing to say. She did not know what the concern was. She knew her brother had been told by someone, in some room, and had not come down the road to tell her, and she had spent the whole of the walk back composing what she would say when he did.

"I don't know about a truck," said Helen.

"No?"

"No." It was the truth. It took her a moment to realise it was not a comfort. "I'll ask."

"Will you tell me?"

"I'll tell you what I can." She stood up, and her knees cracked. "Leave the mending. I'll do it Friday. I'll put your sheets by."

The woman went. Helen stood in the middle of the laundry with her sleeves rolled and her hands wet, and the drum behind her turned on its slow cycle, with the soap sliding down the glass, and she thought: Ben has known since Saturday.

The note came at eleven, with the Aldous boy, who handed it over at the door with the air of a man delivering a summons and then ran. It was a half sheet, torn from a log, in her brother's handwriting, which looked as if it had been written on a knee. *Coming this afternoon. I'm sorry. I should have come first. B.*

She put it in her apron pocket. She did not answer it.

• • •

She found her mother in the long dark room behind the control room, the one with the records cabinet and the shelf of old chief's ledgers, kneeling on the floor in front of the bottom drawer with a pile of folded paper at her side. She did not look round. She had her hair tied up in a rag, and her sleeves were grey to the elbow with dust. She looked like a woman looking for something she had hidden herself.

"Mum."

"Helen." She went on turning papers. "Is it the changeover?"

"It's a truck."

The papers stopped.

Ruth did not turn round at once. She sat back on her heels, slowly, with a sheet still in her fingers, and Helen watched her back, the narrow shoulders under the old jersey, and the nape of her neck, which was thin and brown and had the tendons standing in it like cords. She did not say anything. She was, Helen thought, thinking about what to say.

"Who told you?"

"The lodging-house woman. Who's had it from somebody. It seems to be everywhere. I'd like to hear it from you."

"It's not a secret."

"It's not a thing you told me."

"No." Ruth got up. She did it in two movements, with a hand on the cabinet, and stood in the grey light from the window with her dusty hands hanging. "I spoke to the driver on Sunday. After the—after supper. It's the grain truck, it goes to the district Thursday. It's only a run. He's eight seats, he's a quarter of a drum, he's got a load going down and nothing coming up. I asked him to hold some places." She said it quickly, as one gets a splinter out. "I thought it would be easier. If I'd a seat for you and the child, I'd know where you were. If it came to it. If it came to nothing, he'd have taken a few extra passengers to the district and I'd have given him a cheese."

"A seat."

"Two."

"For me and the child."

"Yes."

"And who else?"

Ruth looked at the paper in her hand. She folded it in four, and then in eight, as if she were putting it away.

"Patrick," she said. "Ben. I'd have asked him, I haven't." She stopped. "Tessa, because she's in the house. The two lads from the station, because they'd be needed to bring it back." She did not look up. "And me, for the eighth. I wouldn't go."

"That's eight."

"Yes."

"Who else did you think of?"

"It's a truck, Helen, it's a truck, it's got eight seats. I'd to put some names down." She said it with quick irritation. "I didn't put the old man down. I didn't put the Aldous baby. I didn't put June, or Martin's people, or the four on the hill with chests. I didn't put anyone that I'd have to look in the face. I thought: I'll put the people I can't stand to lose and I'll think about the rest on Monday." Her voice shook, very slightly, and steadied. "It's Tuesday. It was a thing I did, and I'm not proud of it, and it was done at half past nine on a Sunday night after I'd had a bad supper. That's all."

Helen stood in the doorway with her arms at her sides.

She felt the thing she did not want to feel. She felt grateful. She felt it all the way down, from her throat to her heels, a cold swift wash of it, as one feels the water close over one's head on a hot day. It was not noble, and it was not anything she could do anything with.

"I'll take it," she said. "For the child."

"Both of you."

"For the child."

"Helen—"

"I'll take it for the child and I'll see about myself," said Helen. "And I want to know who the other three would be, if you'd thought."

"I'd not thought."

"You've had since Sunday."

"I know how long I've had," said Ruth. She looked, for the first time, old. It showed in the slackness about her mouth. "Go on. Say it."

"There's nothing to say. You've done what a person does." She heard her own voice, level, and hated it. "You looked after yours."

She went out. She went down the long path to the road at a fast walk with the paper in her pocket against her hip and her mother's voice not following her, and she did not stop until she was out of sight of the station.

• • •

June was in the store, at the long counter, ticking things off a list.

She was in a better temper than Helen had expected. She had the keys on the counter in front of her, and a mug of tea, and a heap of blankets at her elbow, and she looked up when the door opened with the tired, steady, cautious face of a woman who has not been sitting down for some time. "Helen. Come in. I've been wanting you. Has Ben—"

"Ben's sent a note."

"Has he." June's mouth thinned. "Sit down, love. You look done."

"There's a truck," said Helen.

She had not meant to say it like that, bluntly, standing, in the middle of the floor. She had meant to say it in some other way, in a sentence that began with her having been asked. It came out, and then she could not get it back. She heard it fall into the store like a stone into a well.

"A truck," said June.

"The grain truck. Thursday. Eight seats. My mother's put names on it: her own, and Patrick's, and mine and the child's, and Ben's,

Tessa's, two of the station lads." She counted it off on her fingers, and her voice was perfectly steady, and she was ashamed at how steady it was. "Not the old man, with his nine steps. Not the Aldous baby. She's not a bad woman. It's what she did."

June said nothing.

She put down the pen. She put it down carefully across the list, so that it lay straight, and she looked at it, and then at Helen.

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you ought to know."

"And have you said you'll go?"

"I've said I'll take the child."

"So you're going to take the seat," said June, "and tell me about it."

Helen did not answer. She had known as she said it what she was doing, and had kept on all the way down the hill. She stood in the cold store among the sacks with her coat open and her face going hot and then cold, and thought that if she were a better person she would have gone home. She was telling on her mother in order to be able to take what her mother had given her. She wanted the seat, and she wanted to be someone who had not wanted it.

"I'm not proud of it," said Helen.

"No," said June. She did not say it unkindly. "Well. That's two of us who've got something to be not proud of, this week." She picked up the pen again. "I'll go and see your mother. I'll go this afternoon."

"She'll know it was me."

"She'll know it was somebody." June looked at her over the glasses, a long measuring look, and Helen thought that it was the look she had given every child in the town across a kitchen hatch for thirty years. "You'll have to be able to say you told me, if she asks. Can you?"

"Yes."

"Then go home and eat something."

• • •

She packed in the evening, because there was nothing else she could do.

She did it at the kitchen table, after the child had gone to bed, with the lamp low, putting one thing at a time into the carpet bag: two nightgowns, the good socks, the small blue cardigan, the tin with the medicine and the clinician's card in it, the one from the district, with the clean embossed address that she had not looked at for two years. It was a small bag. She had thought it would be bigger. She stood looking at it, and at the open drawer, and at the dozen things she had not put in, and found that she could not think what it was that a person took.

She had not heard the stair. The child was in the doorway in her nightgown with her hair coming out of its plait and her feet bare on the cold boards, looking at the bag with a perfect, grave, unembarrassed attention.

"Are we going on the truck?"

"Who said anything about a truck?"

"Mrs Aldous said. In the yard. She said to Gran's friend there was a truck, and Gran was going to put us on it." She came into the room. "Are we going?"

"It's only if. It's only in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case it gets cold."

"It's already cold," said the child. She considered the bag. "Is it only for us?"

Helen did not answer.

"Because the old man at the bridge can't do his step." The child said it simply, as one states a fact about a chair. "I carried his bag up it on Friday and he had to sit on the third one. He can't get down by himself. If there's a truck, who'll carry him?"

There was a long pause. The lamp ticked. Outside, a long way down the road, a dog began to bark and was told to stop.

She could have said a number of things. She could have said that it was not her business, which was true; or that people had arrangements, which was more or less true; or that the old man had a daughter, which was not. She could have said that it would be seen to. It was what mothers said. It was what her own mother said, in the same level voice, over a bowl, and she had hated it. She looked at the small face, the straight brows, the grave steady eyes with the lamp in them, and she knew that she was not going to be able to say it.

"I don't know," said Helen. "I don't know who'll carry him."

"Somebody should."

"Yes."

"Could we?"

"I don't know," said Helen, again. She put out her hand, and the child came the rest of the way across the boards and leaned against her side, small and warm and smelling of soap, and neither of them looked at the bag. "I'll think about it. That's all I can say. I'll think about it in the morning."

"That's what Gran says."

"I know," said Helen. "I know it is."

9

Everyone in the room

June had put out every chair in the school, and it was not enough.

Ruth stood in the door of the old schoolroom at seven on Wednesday evening and counted the room as she counted a gallery, without meaning to. A hundred and ten, a hundred and twenty. Children's drawings still hung from a string along one wall, faded paper suns and boats and a very large orange cat. The two stoves were lit and the windows were already running with the breath of the room, and the whole place smelled of wet wool and paraffin and bread, because June had set out a trestle at the back with the loaves from Patrick's oven and a jug of tea and nobody had dared to touch it. There were people on the floor under the windows. There were people standing three deep at the back. A baby was crying in the corner, steadily, without conviction, like something wound up.

"Ruth." June was at her elbow, in her good scarf, with the keys at her belt. "You'll sit at the front."

"I'll stand."

"You'll sit at the front, so they can see you've come." June put a hand under her arm, briefly, and took it away. "You say what you know. You say what you don't. I'll do the rest."

She sat at the front, on a child's bench, between Ben and a bucket of coal. He did not look at her. He had washed his face, and he sat

with his elbows on his knees and his eyes on the floorboards, very upright, like a man waiting to be called in. Behind them, along the wall, Patrick had taken the end of the trestle and was cutting bread with the steady regularity of a man with his own reasons for being busy.

June rapped on the stove with a spoon.

• • •

It was a bad meeting. Ruth knew it by the second minute and did not stop knowing it for two hours.

Ruth stood up. She had no notes. She never had. She held on to the end of the bench with her fingertips, and the room went quiet in a way she could feel against her face, like heat from a door.

"The drains are the thing," she said.

It came out too loud. She lowered it. "There's a gallery at the foot of the dam. It's got drains in it, to take away the water that gets under the concrete. If the drains are working, the dam's fine. If they're not, the water pushes up from underneath, and the dam's holding less than it should. That's all it is. It's not cracks. It's not the face." She looked at the faces, rows of them, in the yellow light. "I've one gauge that works. It reads higher than it did. Ben's put the readings on a chart, over nine years. It's been going up slowly. A good part of that was a mark on the wall that got knocked. Not all of it."

"How much?" said a man at the back.

"Half. About half."

"So half's nothing."

"Half isn't nothing," said Ruth. "I don't know what it is. That's what I've to say. I've not got a number I can give you. I've got a thing that's moved a little, in a place I can't see."

"Then why's Ben refusing to sign?" said a woman.

"Because I asked for time," said Ruth. "He's given it. I've not used it as I should."

She heard that go through the room, like a draught under a door. Ben had not moved. It was the first true thing she had said to the town in three days, and she had said it without meaning to, and she could not tell whether it had been a good thing to say.

"What would you do, if you could do what you like?" said June, from the stove. "For the room, Ruth. Say it plain."

"I'd lower the lake."

The baby had stopped crying. She had not noticed it stop.

"There's an outlet at the bottom, low down, that feeds a channel. We could open it. It takes days, not hours. It brings the water down, and the less water against the dam, the less it's asked to hold. Then we could get in properly and look. Open up the far end. Find out." She drew breath. "It brings it below the intake. That's the trouble. The intake's the pipe that feeds the turbines. If the lake's below it, they've nothing to run on."

"How long?" said Pete.

"Till it's fixed."

"How long's that?"

"I don't know. It depends what's wrong. And what we can get."

"Till spring?"

"I don't know."

"Till next year?"

"I don't know, Pete."

He sat down. She had thought the room would be angry, and it was not. It was something worse, a kind of strained, dismayed, practical attention, like a street where everyone has just seen the same thing fall out of a window. Then someone said, "What about the cold store?" and someone else said, "What about the goats?" and the thing came apart in her hands.

• • •

They were all good questions. That was the horror of it.

The cold store was on the mains, said Kit, and if the power went he had three weeks of everybody's butter and a side of beef that had cost somebody a year's wages, and where was it to go? The woman from the upper road with the toddler said her mother could not do stairs and could not be cold. A man with a long, dry, patient face, who kept goats on the bank above the reservoir, wanted to know whether a lowered lake would crack his bank. A girl from the clinic said the room would need a heater, and the heater was electric. Two of the lads from the station, who had been working eleven-hour days since Monday, asked whether they'd be paid. The woman who kept the lodging house said she had three guests booked for Thursday and did she cancel. Somebody called out that the pump would stop. Somebody else said it wouldn't, it was gravity, and a third said it was both.

"Thursday's run," she said, over the noise. "The grain truck. Eight seats to the district. I'm told they're spoken for." She did not look at Ruth. She did not need to. "They're not. I'll give them out, by need. Babies, chests, the old. Families after." Somebody at the back let the door bang. "And shut that."

She said it evenly. Ruth sat with her eyes on the floor and her hands between her knees and felt the room turn and look at her, a whole warm sea of faces, and then look away. At the end of the trestle, Patrick stopped cutting bread. He did not look up. The knife lay on the board.

"Yes," said Ruth.

"I'm not asking you," said June, kindly. "I'm telling them."

• • •

Martin spoke last. He had been sitting by the door the whole evening with his arms folded and his chair tilted back against the wall, in his good jacket, saying nothing. She had known he would. She had known, in the way one knows a ladder is going to slip, from the moment she saw him come in and take that seat. He let the chair down quietly and stood up.

"I'd like to ask a thing," he said.

"Martin," said June.

"I'm not going to make a speech." He did not raise his voice. He had a way of speaking in a meeting that was the opposite of Ruth's: he spoke softly, so that people leaned. "I'd like to understand what we're being asked to choose between. As I hear it, it's one of two things. Either we run the winter as we have, and Ben won't sign. Or we lower the lake, and the town stops." He looked at Ruth. "Is that all there is?"

"It's what there is."

"Is it?" Martin considered. "Because there's a door at the east end of that gallery, Ruth, that's been stuck for two years. And behind it's forty feet of drain nobody's looked at since. I've heard that said tonight and I've not heard anyone say why it's stuck." He did not say it unkindly. He said it with the great plain courtesy of a man putting a thing on a table. "I'd like to know if anyone's tried to open it."

The room went quiet.

"No," said Ruth.

"Why not?"

"There was the pump."

"There was the pump." Martin nodded slowly. "There was. Good reason." He turned to the room. "I had the lad on it, and the hoist, and I'd do it again. But nobody's tried the third thing. There's a door at the end of that gallery and forty feet of drain behind it, and I've a hoist and eleven people and a week. If it's fine we've lost a week. If

it's not, we know. Either way we've not turned off the town on a guess."

It was not a bad speech. That was what she could not forgive it. It was a good speech, with a hole in it that she could not find, and the room had been waiting all evening for somebody to tell it that there was a third thing, and now there was.

"It could take longer than a week," said Ben. It was the first thing he had said. He did not stand. "It could be more than one door."

"It could."

"I'd support it," said Ben, "if it's a test. If we agree what counts as better. If we agree what we do if it's not."

"Then we agree," said Martin.

"That's not agreed," said somebody, and somebody else said it was, and a third said they hadn't been asked, and the baby began again in its corner, thin and wound-up and persistent as a clock.

June rapped on the stove. She did it three times. Nobody heard. She stood with the spoon in her hand and her white head bent and looked, for a moment, small, and then she raised her head and said in a clear voice that she would not take a vote.

"It's not a thing a vote could do," said June. "I can't make Martin lend a hoist or Ruth open an outlet or Pete's wife stay in her house. I can tell you what I know and what I'm going to do. Nobody's to be cold. The seats are to be fair. Martin, put your plan on a bit of paper. Ben, say what you'd count as better. Friday." Her voice shook, a very little. "That's all I've got."

Nobody argued. It would have been easier if they had.

• • •

The cold came up from the road like water when she went out.

She stood on the school step in the dark with her hat in her hand, and the door swinging behind her letting out wedges of yellow light, and heard the town begin to divide.

It did it quietly. She had expected shouting. She stood on the step and watched the hundred and twenty people who had sat in a room together an hour before break into twos and fives and tens, and form, as iron filings form, around whatever was nearest. Martin stood under the lamp by the gate with eleven of his people in a half ring around him, and his low voice carried in pieces: hoist, Friday, the lad, the east door, the chain. Kit and two of the cold-store men walked up the road talking about butter. June stood by the school door with her ledger and a knot of women, saying names. Pete's wife and four others had their heads together under the chapel wall, and one of them was crying, quietly, with her hand over her mouth.

"Ruth."

Patrick had come out behind her with his coat on his arm. He stood beside her on the step, not touching her, and looked at the yard, and she saw that his face was tired and not at all surprised.

"Are you coming home?"

"In a minute."

"There's bread. I've a loaf that nobody ate." He held it out, wrapped in a cloth. It was still faintly warm. "I think I've fed eleven people and one of them was June."

She took the loaf. It was a good loaf. She stood with it against her chest in the freezing air and looked at the groups, at Martin's ring and June's knot and the knot under the chapel wall, each one going about some different business in the dark, and she understood that she had said more tonight than she had said in thirty years, and more than she had meant to, and more than she had wanted to be true, and that it had bought her nothing at all.

She had told them everything she knew. She had told them the truth. She had told it badly, but she had told it. And every person in that room had heard it, and gone away, and was now making a separate plan.

"It's only the first night," said Patrick.

"Is it?"

"It's only the first night," he said again, and put his arm through hers, and they walked home together down the frozen lane, behind the yard's last lamp.

10

The repair they can try

Martin's plan was written on the back of a pump-housing drawing, in carpenter's pencil, and he laid it on the control-room bench at six on Thursday morning like a man laying down a hand of cards.

It was a good plan. She saw that in the first half minute, and disliked it for the whole of the second. There were four steps, each numbered, each with the weight and the name of whoever would do it. The iron door on the east end of the gallery would be taken off its frame, not forced, with a chain hoist hung from a beam that Tessa had already looked at and a pair of bottle jacks to start the lift. The drain behind it would be cleared with rods, a length at a time, from the near end, with a hand pump to flush and a bucket to see what came out. Where the rods would not pass, they would stop. There was a drawing of the rods. There was a list of what he needed from the station: the trolley, the long lamp, two lengths of plank. And at the foot, in a smaller hand, a line that said *If it does not clear in six days, I say so.*

"Six days," said Ruth.

"If it's clear sooner I'll say that too." He stood on the other side of the bench in his work jacket, with the cold coming off him, and did not smile. "I've talked it over with Ben. He's told me what he'd want to count."

"I know what he'd want to count."

"Then you'll have an opinion."

Ben was at the board with his back to them, pretending to read a dial. She could see him listening with the whole of his shoulders.

"I've one," said Ruth. She made herself say it, as one makes oneself put a foot on a cold floor. "It's a good plan. I didn't think you'd have one."

"Nor did I," said Martin, "till Wednesday." And something happened round his mouth, not a smile, but the place where one would have been. "It's not kindness, Ruth. It's the only job in town, and I've a machine under a sheet."

"I know why you're doing it."

"Then we're agreed."

"What's better?" she said.

"I'm sorry?"

"You've said six days. What do I see in six days that tells me it's worked?"

"That's Ben's," said Martin, and turned his head.

• • •

Ben had written it on a card. He took it from his pocket as if it had been there all night, which it had, and put it on the bench, and she read it standing, with her hands flat on either side.

East gauge back to Oct. last year's mark, or lower, within ten days of the drain opening. Toe weir not rising. No new wet on the gallery wall. West drain gauge (new) reads steady or falls. If any one of these fails, we say so, and we talk about the lake.

There were four lines. They were in his square careful hand. It was exactly what she would have asked for, if she had thought of it, and it was a good deal harder than anything she would have dared to propose.

"West drain gauge," said Ruth.

"Tessa's found one. From the stock. It's a pump gauge, it'll do." He still did not turn. "It's so there's two. It's so we're not hanging it all on the east one."

"You'll be wanting to chalk it on the wall."

"I'd thought on the wall in the gallery. Where we can all see it." He swallowed. "And a copy for June."

"Chalk it," said Ruth. "I'll sign."

He turned round at that. He looked at her over the top of the card, with his father's open face and her own jaw, and it came to her that it was the first time in a week he had looked at her without arranging his face first. He looked exactly as he had when he was nine and had brought her a dead bird.

"And Martin signs," said Ben.

"I'll sign," said Martin. "I'd have asked."

• • •

It took them the whole of Thursday to set the hoist, and she had not enjoyed a day so much in a year.

She was ashamed of it, a little, and could not make herself mind. They went down to the east end of the gallery at eight, six of them, with the trolley and the planks and the long lamp, and it was cold and wet and the bulbs buzzed, and by nine she had stopped being anybody's mother or anybody's chief and was one of a crew. Tessa had the beam. She went up the ladder in her borrowed boots with a rope round her waist and sat astride it as if it were a horse, and ran her palm along its underside, and said, "It's sound. It's sound to here. I'll not hang a full lift on this end, it's got a bit of rust in the seat. Move it two feet along." Martin said it was a good beam. Tessa said it was a good beam two feet along. They moved it. Nobody remarked on it.

It was the work she knew, and she had not done it in company for years: the long rhythm of a job where every person knows what the next thing is. The chain going up through the block with its dry

rattle. The jack ticking. A man at each end of the plank, calling the lift in a low voice, “Up. Hold. Up.” Pete, who had said nothing since Monday, said something under his breath about the chain, and the older man who ran the boring bar laughed, a short rusty sound, and she realised with surprise that she had not heard him laugh in the ten years she had known him. Somebody started singing, flat, to himself, and somebody else told him to stop. Dust came down from the roof of the tunnel in a thin yellow haze and settled on the lamp.

“Ruth.”

It was Tessa, at her elbow, in a cloud of cold and cutting-oil. She had grease to the elbow and a streak of it across her forehead, and she was not looking at the door.

“Can I say a thing?”

“Say it.”

“Not here.” Tessa jerked her head. “The side. By the weir.”

They went round the corner, into the short blind tunnel where the weir staff stood in its box with the water ticking over the notch, and Tessa put her back against the wall and looked at her boots.

“It’s the bar,” she said.

“What bar?”

“For the rods. The couplings.” She spoke fast, in a low voice. “He’s using the bronze. The good stock, the bar for the district order, the pump he’s got to deliver at the end of the month. It’s the only bar we’ve got, it’s what he’s got to finish it with. I’ve cut eleven lengths. He told me to. I’m going to have to cut four more.” She swallowed. “He’s not said. He’s not said anything about it. He says it’s bar. But it’s the district order, Ruth, it’s the one job he’s got left. If he’s short he’s late, and if he’s late they’ll take it to the river works, and there’s not another.”

Ruth looked at her.

“I thought you ought to know. Somebody should.” Tessa wiped her forehead and made it worse. “Nobody’s said what it costs.

Everyone's so pleased. I've been standing there cutting up his wages for an hour, and he's humming."

"He's humming."

"He's happy," said Tessa, in a kind of fury. "It's the first time since March. He's got a thing to do that isn't that machine."

She went back, in her enormous boots. Ruth stayed a little longer by the weir, with the water ticking over the notch beside her, and then she walked slowly back along the gallery to where Martin was standing on the plank with a chain in his fist, running a long thumb down a link.

"That's the district bar," she said, quietly.

He did not look round. "It's bar."

"It's your order."

"It's a bit of bronze." He ran the thumb down the next link. "I know what it is, Ruth. I did the sum on Tuesday night. A fortnight behind, and I'll tell them why in the morning. They can take it or leave it." He looked down at her then, from the plank, his handsome ruined face open and unembarrassed, and he said, in a voice she had not heard from him in years: "I'd sooner be a fortnight late with the thing that's right than on time with the other."

She stood there with her face hot, in the cold, and said nothing, and could not remember afterward whether she had said thank you.

• • •

Patrick brought the dinner down at one, in a hand barrow, with a cloth over it.

They ate on the apron, in the sun, which had come out thin and white after the morning's cloud, sitting on the low wall in a long row like starlings with their tin plates on their knees and their backs against the warm concrete. It was a pie, a big flat one, with a crust that broke under the spoon and something dark and savoury under it, and boiled potatoes in their skins, and a can of tea with the sugar already in. Patrick went along the wall with the ladle. He gave Mar-

tin the biggest piece and did not remark on it. He gave Tessa the corner, because she liked the corner. He stopped in front of Ben and put a second helping on his plate without asking.

Nobody argued. That was the thing she kept noticing. They sat in the sun with their mouths full and said nothing of any weight whatever. Kit's motor man told a long and unlikely story about a ferret and a fuse box. Pete's mouth was full and he laughed through it and had to be thumped. Martin said that the crust was a crime, and Patrick said that he would take that as a compliment, and Martin said it was meant as one, and held out his plate. The sun lay on the long grey slope of the dam. Below them the reservoir moved against the stones with the small flat slap she had known for thirty years.

"It's a very good plan," said Patrick, low, in her ear.

"It is."

"Are you cross?"

"A bit."

"Good." He bit into a potato. "It'd be a worry if you weren't."

• • •

They got the door's weight onto the chain by five, and the pins out by dusk.

"Don't go in," said Ruth.

"We're not going in," said Martin.

"Not till it's propped. Not till it's been looked at."

"We're not going in till Saturday." He wiped his face with his sleeve. "I told you. Four steps. This is the second one." He was grinning. He had not stopped grinning for an hour, in his slow way, as a man grins who has been carrying something heavy for a long time and has found a place to put it down. "It's a good door."

"It's a good door."

They went off in twos and threes, tired and dirty and pleased, up the long tunnel toward the light, and she heard Tessa begin to sing again, in the middle of the party, out of tune, and nobody told her to

stop. Ruth stayed. She stood at the mouth of the doorway with the lamp in her left hand, looking at the dark. It was the first time in two years that she had looked at it without the sense that something was looking back.

"Mum."

Ben had stayed too. He stood a yard behind her with his sleeves still rolled and his hair standing up in dust and a dark smear along one cheekbone, looking not at the door but at the lamp.

"Pass us that."

She did not ask what. The long steel probe was lying on the trolley beside her, the one he had been using all afternoon to check the pin sockets, and she took it up and held it out to him by its handle, and he took it without looking, as one takes a thing from a hand one has taken it from for twenty years.

"Thanks."

"It's yours," said Ruth. "It's been yours since you were fifteen."

"It's got your name on it."

"It's got your teeth marks." She felt her mouth move. "You chewed the end."

"I was cold."

"You were eight."

"I was cold," said Ben, with dignity. They stood side by side at the open dark with the lamp between them, and she saw the corner of his mouth begin to go, and then it had, and he laughed, helplessly, with his head down and his shoulders going, and she found that she was laughing too, in the dripping tunnel, the two of them at the mouth of the drain, in the lamplight, in a long breathless shaking ridiculous wave that she could not stop and did not want to.

It was a week since either of them had done it. It did not mean anything had been mended. She knew that perfectly well. She stood with her shoulder against his and wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist.

11

The part that fits

The Tender had gone the Saturday before, a little after seven, in the long dust-coloured car with the green generator in the trailer behind it, and nobody had made anything of it. They had stayed four nights in Patrick's back room, which Patrick said was three more than they were known to give anywhere. Tessa had run the set nineteen hours on a block in the yard, in shifts, and it had not died. The Tender had counted the agreed rate into Martin's ledger, coin by coin, with a thin dry hand, and had said nothing of a receipt, or a name, or coming back.

They had said something to Tessa at the tailboard that Ruth did not hear. Tessa told her afterward, standing in the yard by herself with her eyes on the road. That it was hers. That it wasn't anybody's to say but hers. "It's a funny thing to say to someone," she said. She had told the man from the river works not yet. She would stay for the drain, she said. She was not saying after.

Ruth had meant to ask the Tender something. She had stood at the back all that morning with it in her mouth. She had meant to say: you've seen a good many of these. Would you come and look at a drain. She had thought it clearly, and had not said it, because she knew the answer. It would have been a kind one. They would have said that it was not theirs to look at, that they were a pair of hands

for a failing engine in somebody else's yard, and that she had a perfectly good chief engineer, and he was her son. She had thought, watching the dust settle on the cutting: I should have asked. She had thought: I should not have.

• • •

The drain opened at noon.

They had been at it since first light. By ten the iron door was lifted out of its frame and swung aside on the chain, hanging in the gallery like a big black leaf, and Martin and Tessa and the older man from the boring bar had put the first rod in at the near end, a straight steel length with a steel head the size of a fist, and begun to feed it, a yard at a time, into the dark. It went in easily for six feet. Then it stopped. They flushed it, with the hand pump and a bucket, and it went in another three, and stopped. They flushed it again.

Ruth stood at the mouth of the doorway with the lamp, and watched the water come out.

It came as a sort of grey slow slurry first, thick as thin porridge, running along the gutter and over the sill in a long sluggish tongue, and it smelled of rock and mud and something older. There was grit in it. There was a handful of small stones, rounded and orange. There was a crust of something white, like lime, that broke in the flow into flakes. Pete knelt at the edge of it with a sieve and picked out a sodden clot of root, fine as hair and hard as wire, as long as his forearm, and held it up in the lamplight without saying anything. A shiver went down the line of them.

"That's a tree," said Martin.

"It's a root."

"It's been in there some time."

Nobody said anything. They all stood in the dripping lamplight with their faces turned toward it, and the water ran, and ran, and cleared as it ran, from black to brown to grey to the colour of tea, and the older man from the boring bar put his hand over his mouth.

"Ruth," said Ben, quietly. He was crouched beside the east standpipe at the end of the corridor with his lamp held low, and he did not look round. "Come and see."

She went and looked.

The needle had moved. It was not much. It was the width of a hair, a hair and a half, from where it had sat since Monday, in the direction she had wanted for a week, and as she watched it moved again, slightly, as a clock hand moves, without seeming to. She bent and put her face close to the glass. It was going down.

"It's only the flush," she said.

"I know."

"It's only the head dropping because the water's getting out. It doesn't mean—"

"I know it doesn't," said Ben. He was smiling. He was trying very hard not to, with his mouth pressed shut and his lamp shaking slightly in his hand, and he did it so badly that she nearly laughed. "I'm only saying it's going the right way."

"It's going the right way."

"It's going the right way," said Ben, and then, helplessly, "Mum."

• • •

Ben chalked it on the wall at six. He did it in square capital letters, with a stub of white chalk, under the card they had pinned up on Thursday, and everyone who passed went and read it, and nobody laughed. *EAST: DOWN. SATURDAY 6 P.M.* He drew a small neat arrow beside it, pointing at the floor.

It was not enough. It was not a quarter of what was written on the card. Ruth knew that, and Ben knew it, and she saw Martin standing at the back with his arms folded and a slight line between his brows, which was the line he wore when he had made a thing and did not yet trust it. But the lamp was lit. The water ran. The woman with the toddler had come up from the river road, and she stood a little behind the others with the child on her hip and her

mouth open, looking at the chalk, and she said to nobody in a small private voice, "It's going down."

• • •

They had the whole of Sunday afternoon, which was a thing they had not had in a month.

Patrick arranged it. She did not see how. She had gone home at two for the dinner and found the table cleared, and the shutters half closed, and a fire in the bedroom grate, which was a thing he did twice a winter. The grocery was shut. He had put a notice on the door that said *Back at six* in a hand she did not recognise, and he stood in the bedroom door in his shirtsleeves, with a towel over one arm and a ridiculous expression, as if he had been caught building something.

"It's only a rest," said Patrick.

"I've to go back."

"Not till six."

"I've the gauge."

"Ben has the gauge. Ben has had the gauge since Thursday. He's been very good about it, and he's asked me to tell you that if you go near the gallery before six he'll lock you out." He took her coat off her shoulders and put it on the hook. "You've not been in this room for more than four hours at a time in nine days."

"I've been busy."

"I know you've been busy. I've been proud of you. It's very tiring." He was undoing the top button of her shirt with the careful attention of a man doing something that mattered. "I'd like you to be here, Ruth. Just for the afternoon. I'd like to look at you, and not have you look at a pipe."

She let him. It was a bright cold afternoon, with the sun lying in bars across the quilt and the smell of woodsmoke coming up through the boards, and the thin sound of somebody chopping kindling a long way off, badly. He was warm, and slow, and a little

clumsy, and he said something about her feet, and she laughed into his shoulder, and for a while there was nothing in the world but that: his mouth, his ridiculous elbows, the old bed complaining under them, the hair coming loose on the pillow. It was the best hour she had had in a month. She thought it, clearly, in the middle of it, with his face against her neck: this is a thing I would not be without.

She was nearly asleep when the boy came.

It was the Aldous boy, of course. She heard him in the yard before she heard him on the stair, a fast flat patter and a high voice shouting, and the door banging, and Patrick said a short word into the pillow and sat up. "I'll go," he said. "I'll tell him you're dead."

"Ruth!" The voice was in the hall. "Ruth! It's Ben! He says come! He says it's the gauge!"

She was out of bed before she had thought, with the quilt trailing, her heart going hard and fast under her ribs, in the old cold clench of the stomach that nine days had put there. She found her trousers. She stood hopping, with one boot on, and Patrick behind her, still, saying nothing at all, watching her do what she always did.

"What's he say?" she called. "What's it done?"

"It's down!" shouted the boy, up the stair. "He says it's down to October! He says it's all the way! He says bring the tea!"

She stood on one foot, with the quilt round her ankle.

"All the way?"

"To the mark. The chalk. He says to the mark."

She sat down on the end of the bed. She sat with one boot in her hand and her hair in her face and looked at her husband, who had begun, slowly, to grin.

"Well," said Patrick. "There you are."

"It could be the flush."

"It could."

"It could still be—"

"Ruth." He put his arms round her from behind and put his chin on her shoulder, and she could feel him laughing, a low steady shak-

ing. “Put your boot on. Go and look. And then come home and have your dinner and tell me it could be the flush.”

She went down the stair with her hair flying, at a run her knees did not like, and up the hill in the thin gold light with the boy at her side talking the whole way about the roots and the water and Mr Dyer’s face. The whole town seemed to be at its windows and doors, looking at her as she went by, the way people look at a runner they do not wish to hold up. She thought: they want it. They all want it so much.

She wanted it herself. She went up the hill in the clear cold gold, with the dust of the Tender’s car long settled on the cutting, and did not once stop to ask what, exactly, she was hoping for.

12

The wrong improvement

The east gauge held at the chalk mark for three days, and the weir would not come down.

It was Ben who saw it first, because he was reading the weir four times a day by the clock, with a pencil and a torch, and writing it on the wall in his square hand under the card. The weir stood at the foot of the dam in its little brick box, where the gallery drains came out into the open and went over a steel notch, and the depth of water over the notch, read off a painted staff, told you how much was coming out of the dam in all. On the Saturday of the flush it had risen, as it should have, with the drain throwing out the dirty water it had held for two years. Everyone had expected that. Ben had written, beside the first high reading, *flush*. By Monday it ought to have started down. It did not. It sat a finger above where it had been in October, and on Tuesday morning it sat there still.

"It's only a reading," said Ruth.

"It's three readings." He did not say it unkindly. He stood in the gallery in his oilskin with the torch in his fist and the chalk beside it, looking at the staff through the little window in the weir box, and she saw how carefully he did not look at her. "It's not rising. That's the card. But it's meant to fall."

"It didn't say fall."

"It said not rising." He drew breath. "I wrote the card. I know what it said. I'm telling you what I thought it meant."

She knew what he meant. The east gauge told you about one drain. The weir told you about all of them together. One had been helped, and by the weir's reckoning the rest had not.

"And the west?"

"Steady." He pointed. Tessa's gauge, a stubby brass pump gauge screwed onto the west drain's standpipe with a great deal of tape, stood where it had stood on Thursday, at a place that Tessa had marked with a dot of red nail varnish. "It's steady. It's not falling. It's not doing anything." He rubbed his face. "The east drain's open, Mum. I'd have thought the west would have noticed."

• • •

They lost the whole of Tuesday night to the cooling pump.

It had nothing to do with anything. That was the horror of it. At a quarter past eleven the alarm went, the flat three-note bray, and it was number one, the old oil-cooler pump on the main set, which had been making a noise like a wet dog since September and chose that night to stop. She was out of bed with her boots on before Patrick woke. Ben was at the board when she came in, in his shirt, with his hair on end, and the lamp over number one was a steady red.

"It's only the pump," said Ben.

"It's never only the pump."

It was only the pump. It took until six in the morning. They had to take number one off the line, and run the whole town on number two with the lower street dropped, and Helen's feeder was off for four hours and nobody had thought to tell her. Tessa came up at one o'clock in her nightgown and a man's overcoat and held the lamp. Martin sent two of his people. They stripped the pump on the floor of the machine hall in a ring of lanterns, in the smell of hot oil and cold iron, and found a shaft seal gone to jelly, and had no seal,

and made one, out of a bit of leather belt and a great deal of swearing. Nobody read the weir. Nobody read the gauges. It rained, a thin hard rain that came in sideways across the machine hall door and put the lamps out one by one. At five Ben fell asleep sitting up against the turbine casing with a spanner in his hand, and Ruth took it from him and put her jacket over his knees.

• • •

"It's the rock," said Martin.

It was Wednesday morning. They stood in a row at the gallery's east end, the four of them, in front of the open black doorway, with the water running steadily out of it and down the gutter, and he had his arms folded and his collar up and the line between his brows, and he looked a good deal older than he had on Saturday. He had listened to the readings in silence. He had read the wall, the chalk and the card. Then he had said it, in the reasonable voice, as a man says a thing he has been working out.

"It's the rock. There's a hill under there, and it's been full a long time. You open a drain at one end and the rest doesn't come out at once. It's a sponge, Ruth, a big slow one, and the weir's the sum of the lot. I'd be surprised if it showed in three days. I'd be more surprised if it hadn't come down in three weeks."

"Three weeks."

"Give it till the end of the month. Keep the west drain going. There's a smaller door on that side, I've looked, I'll have it off in a week." He did not hurry. "It's not a failure. It hasn't finished."

"I can't prove you wrong," said Ruth.

"No."

"I can't prove you right."

"I'd not ask you to." He looked at the open doorway, at the black mouth with its cold breath, and for a moment she saw not the businessman but the other thing, the thing that had hummed in the gallery on Thursday with a bar of bronze in its fist. "I've cut the district

bar into couplings, Ruth. I've told them I'm a fortnight behind. I'd like it to have been worth that."

"It's been worth something."

"Has it?"

"The east is down."

"Then it's worked," said Martin, quietly, "as far as it's got."

• • •

She went in on Wednesday afternoon.

She had not meant to. She had told Ben she would not. But she stood at the open doorway at three o'clock with the lamp in her hand and the cold coming out of the dark against her face, and she found that she could not make herself walk back along the gallery and up the long path to the control room and sit down to a log, when there were forty feet of drain she had never seen. She took off her jacket. She took the short lamp and the probe and a roll of tape, and knelt, and went in on her hands and knees.

It was a pipe the size of a big chimney, a round concrete throat, slick with a thin skin of grey mud, running away from her into the dark in a gentle fall, and she went down it on her elbows in the lamplight with her knees in cold water and the roof six inches above her back. It smelled of rock and iron and wet. There was a steady sound, ahead and below, the sound of water falling a long way into a pool, and it grew as she went, until she could feel it in her teeth. She went slowly. She stopped every yard, as she had been taught, and tapped the wall with the probe, and listened. It rang. It rang all along, sound and flat, a good concrete note, and she let her breath out, not knowing she had held it.

At thirty feet the pipe turned.

She stopped at the corner, with the lamp held out round the curve, and looked.

The bend was still half silted. A dark bank of mud and grit lay across the invert, with a trickle running over it, and beyond it the

drain went on, narrowing, into blackness. She could feel the air on her face. It was colder here, and moved, a faint steady draught from somewhere further in. She knelt in the mud with her cheek against the wet wall and thought that it was the strangest place she had ever been. It was the inside of her own dam. She had been the chief of it for nine years and walked it every week for twenty-six, and she had never put her face against the place where it was keeping the water out.

The roof was wet. She lifted the lamp.

It was only wet. A dark line ran along the angle where the roof met the rock, the old seam where the pipe had been cast against the hill, with a fine bright sweat standing on it in the lamplight, and here and there a bead forming and letting go. She put a finger to it. It was cold. She had seen it in a hundred places and thought nothing of it in any. She held the lamp up a long time, looking for something to be afraid of, and could not name it.

She took out the roll of tape and marked the wall with a short strip at the bend, so she would know it again.

It was nearly an hour before she came out, backward, on her knees, into the long lamplit gallery with the mud to her thighs and her hair in her face, and found Ben standing at the mouth of the door with his arms folded and a face she could not read.

"I said I wouldn't," she said.

"You did."

"I thought I should see."

"Did you?"

"It's silted at the bend. It's sound. It's wet at the seam, but it's—" She wiped her face with her wrist and made it worse. "It's a drain."

"Is that a good answer?"

"I don't know," said Ruth. She sat back on her heels on the wet floor, and for the first time since the day she had read the gauge on the Monday morning, with the egg in her pocket, she said a thing aloud that she had been saying to herself for a fortnight. "I don't

know what I've got, Ben. I've one gauge that's fine and one weir that isn't and a wall that's wet in a place it's always been wet. I've two good people telling me it's a sponge. I've not got a number I'd stake a stair on."

He looked down at her.

He did not say anything. He crouched, slowly, at the lip of the doorway, so that his face was level with hers, and for a moment she thought he was going to touch her sleeve. He did not. He looked at the mud on her knees and the grey wet tangle of her hair.

"What do you want to do?" said Ben.

"I want someone who isn't us to look."

"Who?"

"There's a man at the district. An engineer. Dams, drains, concrete. I met him once, at a funeral. I've got his name, in a book." She said it carefully, as one lays down a bundle of sticks. "I'd like to take him what we've got. The sheets, your chart. The weir. Photographs, if Marit'll lend the clinic's camera. The drawing of the gallery, what there is of it. I'd like him to tell me if I'm a fool."

"It's two days there and back."

"Three."

"Who goes with you?"

"Nobody. I'll go on Thursday, on the grain truck, if June'll give me a seat." She heard the little twist in her own voice, and let it stay. "I thought I'd better ask her. I'd not like to be accused of arrangements."

Ben laughed. It was a short surprised sound, with no bitterness in it. He put his hand over his mouth.

"Ben." She looked at him, from the floor, in the lamp. "I need you to take the station. Not for a day. For as long as it takes. I need someone to read the gauges and the weir. To say yes or no to Martin. To sign for what goes through that door."

He did not answer at once. He crouched in the mouth of the doorway with his forearms on his knees and the cold air from the

drain stirring his hair, and she saw the whole of his face go through something, very quickly, like weather over a field, and settle.

"Yes," said Ben.

"I'll write it down."

"You don't have to write it down."

"I'd like to," said Ruth. "I'd like it written. I'd like it to be somewhere that isn't only in my head."

PART THREE

The water stays high

13

The covered district

The district had hot water in the taps, and it took Ruth most of a morning to stop noticing.

She noticed it first in the washroom of the transport office, where she had gone to take the dust of the road off her face. The tap ran hot. It ran hot at once, with no waiting and no rusty spit, and went on running while she stood looking at it with a towel in her hand, like a woman who has been handed a baby by a stranger. Then somebody came in, a girl in a green apron with her hair under a net, and said good morning without looking, and turned the other tap, and went out again. Nobody on the stairs had looked at her. That was what she noticed second: the speed of it, the great well-fed indifference of a place where nobody needed anything from her at all.

It was not a grand town. She had expected something grander, the way one does of a place one has only heard about. It had a long street with a tram in it, and a market under a tin roof, and a great many people in good boots carrying parcels and eating things out of paper. It had lamps along both sides that came on by themselves at four. A man was shouting at a boy about a bicycle. A woman on a step was reading a long printed sheet with the absorbed, slightly cross attention of somebody doing her accounts. It was ordinary. She stood on the pavement outside the transport office with the

satchel on her shoulder, looking at it, and thought that she had never been so frightened of an ordinary place in her life.

The satchel held the folder, the chart, the weir readings in Ben's hand, three drawings of the gallery that were half guesses, and eleven photographs. Marit had taken them with the clinic's camera, the one for wounds, in the cold, with a lamp held by Tessa. Most had come out grey. Two were clear. One showed the wet seam at the bend in the drain, the bright sweat along the roof, with a ruler laid beside it, and Ruth had looked at it on the truck for most of two hours and had not been able to say what it told her.

• • •

The engineer had an office on the third floor of a brick building with a cat in it.

He was a thin tidy man with a pencil behind each ear and an unlit pipe he never put to his mouth, and he stood up when she came in and shook her hand and said, "Mrs Sayer. We met at the Hallam funeral." She had not thought he would remember. "You told me my tie was crooked. It was. Sit down. Will you take tea? My assistant will bring it. Don't mind the cat, she's decided she's a surveyor."

The cat was lying across a roll of drawings on the big table with her paws tucked under. Ruth sat. She laid her folder on the one clear corner. She had worked out on the truck what she would say, and she said it, in order, the way she would give a shift report: the dam, the gallery, the drains, the gauge, the weir. The pin. The ladder. The step and the slope. The east drain opened and cleaned, the gauge at its mark, the weir not falling. The west gauge, steady. She did not say that she was afraid. She had thought she might, and had decided against it, and he did not ask.

He listened without a word. When she had done he spread the chart on the table, moving the cat, and went through it with the stem of the pipe, a point at a time, and then through the photo-

graphs, and then the drawings. He took a long time over the drawings. He did not smile at them.

"You've done this well," he said.

"Ben did the chart."

"He did it very well. It's the right chart. I'd have done it the same." He sat back. "May I ask some questions? I'm going to ask a good many. I'd like you to understand in advance that most of them will be ones you can't answer, and that it isn't a failing. It's only where the edge is."

"Ask."

He asked. He asked whether the east gauge had been read at the same hour each time, and she said it had not, not in the early years. He asked whether the lake had been at the same level, and she said near enough. He asked how near. He asked whether the gauge had been tested against a second, at any time, and she said no. He asked how the pin had been seated and what it was made of and whether there was a fixed mark anywhere else in the gallery to check it against, and she said Ben had run a level from the crest. He nodded. He asked about the weir, how it was read, by eye or by gauge, and by whom, and whether anyone had ever put a bucket under it and timed the fill. She said no. He asked about the drain behind the door. How had it been closed. By what. When. She said two summers, and the pump, and he said, quite gently, "Yes. The pump," and wrote it down.

He asked whether the water coming out of the drains had been clear. She said it had been, in all the years she had known it. He asked if she had looked at it since the flush, and she said yes, it was clear now, it had cleared within the hour. He wrote that down. He underlined it. He did not tell her what it meant.

"Now the ones you can't answer," he said. "Is there any movement in the crest. Is there any movement at the abutments. Has anyone surveyed the face. What's happening in the rock on the far side of the drains, beyond forty feet. Is anything coming through at the toe

that you haven't seen." He put the pipe down on the drawing. "I can't tell you any of it from here. Neither can you. That's what I want to say."

She sat with her hands in her lap. The cat stretched and re-folded herself.

"What do you think?" said Ruth.

"I think you've a dam with an old drainage system that's slowly losing the argument, or one that's been telling you very small lies for several years, and I can't say which." He said it slowly, as one says a thing one has said to others. "I can't certify it from here. I won't say it's safe, and I won't say it's going to fail. If I said either I would be guessing, and you would be right to stop listening to me."

"Then what would you do?"

"I'd lower it."

She had known he would. She had known it on the truck, and the night before, and for three weeks. It went through her all the same, a thin cold clean shock, like a cup of water down the back.

"Slowly," he said. "Over days, not in a rush. The point isn't to empty it. The point is to take some of the load off, so that the thing you're worried about has less to push against, and so that you can get in and look. Open up the rest of the drain. Take cores through the toe. Put a proper gauge in each of the drains. Find out what's there." He picked up the pencil from behind his ear and turned it over. "And then you'll know something, and so will I. And if it's nothing you'll have lost some power for a month and a good deal of temper."

"It stops the turbines."

"I know it does."

"It stops everything. The workshop. The cold store. The clinic. The pump—"

"The pump's gravity."

"It's both."

"Then it'll need looking at." He did not hurry. "Mrs Sayer, I want to be exact about what I can do, because it's less than you'd like and more than nothing. I can't restore your generation. That's a different undertaking, and it's not mine, and nobody I know of would do it this winter. What I can do is help with the other side. I can send two inspectors. They can be with you in ten days, perhaps less. I can find you rooms. There's a hostel and two school halls that can take thirty each, with beds, and a kitchen, and there's a clinic that can hold a dozen. I can help you with the assessment and the access. I can lend you a pump, and a crew to open the rest of your drains." He stopped. "I can't make it painless."

She looked at the photograph on the table, the grey seam in the roof of the drain with its bright sweat and its ruler. She thought: it's a wet seam. It's a wet seam in a wet hill. She had been telling herself that for a week.

"Is it going to fail?" said Ruth.

He was quiet for a time. He did it as a man does who has been asked a question many times and means to answer it honestly each time.

"I don't know," he said. "Nobody does. It's the truest thing I can tell you. I'd say, if you asked me to bet, that it's more likely a nuisance than a catastrophe. But it's the kind of thing where the bet isn't the right way to think." He looked at her. "The question isn't how likely. The question is what you'd do if it were. And you've already told me you'd lower it."

"I haven't."

"You came here," said the engineer, kindly. "It's the same thing."

• • •

She was given tea, by the assistant, in a thick white cup, and she drank it. She was given a letter, typed, on thick paper, setting out in six numbered paragraphs what he had said, in a form that she could read aloud. She was given the name of a woman in the housing office, and a form, and a second form, and a pass for the hostel kitchen, which she did not want and was made to take. Everyone was kind. It was extraordinary how kind they were. Nobody asked her to hurry.

She went out into the street at half past four, in the early lamplight, with the letter in the satchel against her hip, and stood at the corner by the tram stop. The tram came. It was a long yellow car with a light in it and the heads of people at every window, and it hissed to a stop and opened its doors, and she did not get on it. She stood there while it went away, and then another came, and she let that go too.

The grain truck went back at six. She had told the driver she would be on it.

She stood for a long time on the corner, with her hands in her pockets, and then she turned round and walked, without having decided to, into the market. It was a loud bright place under a tin roof with a great many people in it, and it smelled of oranges and hot oil and wet wool. She walked along the stalls with her head down. She passed a woman selling eggs. She passed a stall of brass kettles, shining under the lamps, and a man frying a flat bread in a pan the size of a cartwheel. She was looking for something. She did not know what, until she saw it: a long trestle covered in socks.

They were hung on lines and stacked in baskets, in grey and brown and a dark thick green, with the ribbing very close and the heels doubled. A short woman in a shawl stood behind them with her arms folded and a long indifferent patience. They were wool. They were real wool, with the grease still in it. Patrick had asked her

for a pair in October, in passing, with his mouth full, and she had said she'd see, and had forgotten.

"Wanting something?" said the woman.

"My husband's socks. His feet are—" She held her hands apart. "It's a size eleven. He's very fussy."

"They're all fussy." The woman took down a pair, the green, and turned them inside out. "Feel that. Look at the heel. You'll not find a better heel between here and the coast."

She felt it. It was a good heel. She felt the other one, and another pair, and turned them, and set one against the other, with the cold coming up through her boots and the noise of the market going on about her like weather. It took her twenty minutes. She asked about the wool and the dye and where it came from. She argued about the price, and won, and lost it again on the second pair. She bought three. She stood with them against her chest in their brown paper, with the string cutting into her fingers, and she knew that the truck had gone.

She knew it with a small dull sinking, like a step that is not there. She had the whole of the next day to wait. She had a letter in her satchel. She had to take it home, and put it into the hands of a town that had spent three weeks being told it would be all right, and she had made a little plan, on the way, of how she would say it, in order, in a plain voice. It had gone. She could not remember a word of it. She stood in the market under the lamps with three pairs of socks and thought: I will tell them tomorrow. I will tell them on the truck on the way. I will think of it on the road.

"Anything else?" said the woman in the shawl.

"No," said Ruth. "I've nothing else."

She went and sat on a low wall at the end of the market, where the stalls gave out, with the parcel on her knee, and watched a boy chase a hen between the legs of the crowd. It was a long time before she remembered that she had not eaten.

14

The houses on the list

June's list was written on the back of a ration sheet, in her small tidy hand, and Helen read it standing at the laundry door with a wet sleeve and a child pulling her other arm.

It was a good list. It said what the first truck would carry on Monday, a name against each seat, and under each name a house and a reason. The Aldous baby and its mother. The woman with the toddler and her mother who could not do stairs. Two of the four with chests. The old man at the second bridge house. A line across, and below it, a second column headed *if room*, in which Helen's own name did not appear, and then, lower, in pencil, with a small question mark: *Helen—laundry*? She read that line twice. It was June's way of saying she had not forgotten something she had not yet decided to ask.

"Go and see if it's true," June had said, on the step of the store. "I've not the legs for every door, and you've the habit of them. I sat up with that child of yours the night of the croup, and I never once mentioned it. I'm mentioning it. Go and see if my list is true, and tell me where I've made it up."

She took the child with her, because there was nobody to leave her with, and because the child had made it plain that she would not be left. They went down the river road on Friday morning at ten,

with the handcart empty and the sun a thin white coin behind cloud, and she began at the top, because June had.

• • •

The old man's step was worse than she remembered.

It was eleven inches high, and there were nine of them, cut out of the bank, and the third had a crack across it that he had told her about for six years. The pickup, on June's list, was the lay-by at the top of the school lane, two hundred yards up the hill. She stood at the foot of the step with the child beside her and looked up it, and then up the lane, and then at him, in the doorway above her in his cardigan with his hen-feathers on his sleeve, looking back.

"I can walk it," he said.

"Can you?"

"I can do it in about an hour, if there's a rest." He said it with great dignity. "I've done it before. I did it for my wife."

"That's two hundred yards uphill with a bag."

"It's two hundred and thirty," said the old man. "I've counted."

She looked at the step, and the lane, and the child's face, and understood how it would go. He would try. He would do it with his chin up, on the arm of whoever was nearest, stopping to rest every thirty yards, in the cold, with the truck waiting and nineteen people watching, and somewhere on the way, in front of all of them, he would stop being able to. It would not be anybody's fault. It would be the step.

"We'll bring the cart," said Helen.

"I'm not going in a cart."

"Then we'll bring a chair and two lads."

"I am not," said the old man, "going to be carried like a dresser." But the bit of him that had said it was already looking at the child, who had put her hand on the rail and was counting the steps under her breath, one to nine, with a fierce small frown. "There's the

hens," he said, in a different voice. "That's the real thing. Somebody'd have to see to the hens."

"The hens can go in the cart."

"In the cart," said the old man, and for a moment she thought he would laugh. He did not. He looked at the fence, and the plank, and the long low shed with its tin roof, and said, "I've had that red one nine years."

She wrote *carry. 2 lads. hens (cart).* on the back of the list. It was not a thing she had known how to solve until she wrote it.

• • •

The room over the saddler's was full.

It was on June's list as empty, for the two sisters from the end of the lane who could not be left in a house with a damp wall. Helen climbed the outside stair at noon with the child behind her and knocked, and the door was opened by a woman she had washed for six years, in her stockinged feet with a blanket round her shoulders and a face of such sheepish, desperate courtesy that she knew before she looked past her.

There were five of them. A man, the woman, two small boys and a dog, and a stove that smoked, and a bed made up on the floor under the window, and all the rest of the room hung with wet washing on strings. It was Pete's family. It was Pete's wife, with her eyes red at the rims, and the sound of the dog's tail thumping against a trunk.

"They told us it was spare," said Pete's wife. "The saddler. He said, for as long as we needed. We came up on Monday." She held the blanket together at her throat. "I didn't know it was June's. Nobody said it was June's. I'd not have taken it, if I'd known."

"It's not anybody's fault."

"It's only the boys have had a cough, and the other house had the damp. I'd have gone to the school but it's so full of old men. They snore." She tried to smile. "I'm so sorry, Helen. Tell her I'll move. I'll go whenever she says. I've only to find somewhere."

There was nowhere. Helen stood on the outside stair with the cold wind coming round the corner of the building and thought of it clearly: the list, the column of reasons, the two sisters in their damp house, and a family of five in the room that was meant for them, with a dog.

"I'll tell her," said Helen. "Don't move yet."

"You'll tell her it's all right?"

"I'll tell her it's full."

The child pulled at her sleeve on the way down. "Why are they all in one room?"

"Because it's the room there is."

"Is it a long time?"

"I don't know," said Helen, and heard herself say it again, and saw her daughter hear it.

• • •

The goat man was at the last house but one, a long stone place on the bank above the reservoir, and he would not leave his goats.

He did not argue. That was the thing she remembered afterward. He stood at the gate with a bucket in his hand and a face as long and dry and patient as one of his own animals, and heard her to the end, and said, "No." He said it as one says a thing is raining. There were thirty-one of them. They were in the long shed and the fold behind it, and they had to be milked twice a day, and in the spring they would kid, and he had been up at four that morning to see to a doe that had gone down. There was nobody else. He had asked. He had asked the Aldouses' lad, and the lad had said he would, and had not come.

"If it's only for a week—"

"It's never only a week." He set down the bucket. "I've been told it's a precaution. I'd like to know what the precaution's for. I've been told it's the dam. I've been told there's nothing to see. I've a bank of

grass that's held for forty years, and a house on it, and thirty-one goats, and I'd like to see the thing I'm being asked to run from."

"I'd like to see it too," said Helen.

He looked at her. It was a long careful dry look, not hostile, and something in his face eased a very little. "Your brother says it's a drain," he said. "Your mother says nothing. I'd like to hear from one of them what it'd look like, if it were to go wrong. Not the numbers. What I'd see." He picked up the bucket. "I'll go if I'm told what I'd see. I'm not saying I'll not go. I'm saying I'd like to be told."

She wrote it down. She wrote *goats. 31. wants to be told what he'd see.* She did not know how to put the second thing in a column.

• • •

On Saturday she took the child to the district.

She had not meant to. She had meant to go home and write up the list, and put it in June's hand, and say that it was not as clean as it had looked. It was the child who said it, at breakfast, with her spoon in the air: "Can we see where it is?"

"Where what is?"

"The place with the seats. Where Gran went."

She could have said no. She had her reasons, and they were good ones: it was a day lost, and a day's money, and the drum not run. But there was the grain truck at the gate, with the driver eating a roll in the cab, and a seat in it, and the child had already put her coat on.

They got down at half past ten, in a long street with a tram in it, and the first thing she felt was the warmth. It came out of the doors of buildings. It came out of a baker's on the corner, in a wave that smelled of yeast, and out of a door where a woman was sweeping a step in her shirtsleeves in the middle of November. She stood on the pavement with the carpet bag in her hand and the child's mitten in the other, and thought: nobody here is cold. It was a stupid thought. It was true.

There was a clinic. A woman in a grey coat at the housing office gave her a card, and a pass, and a slip, and said, "Mrs Sayer's daughter. The engineer said you might come," as if it were nothing, and took them down a corridor with a polished floor to a bright warm room where a nurse with strong forearms listened to the child's chest with a steel disc, for a long time, in a profound quiet, and said, "It's the damp. She's got a bit of a wheeze at the bottom, nothing to alarm anybody. A month in a dry room and it'll be gone." She wrote something on a form. "You'll want to do that anyway."

"I didn't say I was going to."

"No," said the nurse. She looked up, not unkindly. "It's just what I'd put, for anyone."

There was a bath. It was not meant as a treat; it was part of the intake, a long white tub in a tiled room with a green curtain, and the child was put into it by a girl in an apron and came out pink and shining and furious with joy, wrapped in a towel as big as a sail. There was a canteen with long tables and a counter, and a woman in a net who gave them each a bowl of soup, and a roll, and a mug of milk, and would not take anything for it. The child sat across the table with her hair dripping on the towel and ate the soup with an expression of grave inward calculation, as at a sum. She did not say anything for a long time. Then she put down the spoon.

"It's very clean," she said.

"It is."

"Is it nicer than ours?"

She had known the question was coming and had thought she knew the answer. She looked at her daughter across the table, the damp curls and the milk moustache and the large honest eyes, and she felt something move in her chest, a loosening, like a knot given a little slack.

"It's warmer," said Helen. "And the water's hot. And there's a woman who gives you soup."

"But is it nicer?"

"No," said Helen. "I don't think so. I think it's—" She stopped. She had never in her life had to find the word for it. "It's good. It's a good place. I'd be glad of it. And ours is ours."

"Can we have another bath before we go?"

"I'll ask."

She asked. The girl in the apron looked at a board, and at the clock, and at the truck waiting at the gate, and said the baths were booked till four. The child took it without argument and went back to her soup, with her wet hair on the towel and the look of a person filing a thing away.

It was only afterward, on a bench in the long bright corridor, with the child asleep against her arm with her wet head on her sleeve, that she let it happen. It was not much. She sat in the warm clean light with the card in her fist and her eyes full, silently, as one is overtaken by a sneeze, and wiped her face on her sleeve, and did not mind. It was not that she was relieved to be here. It was that she was relieved she did not have to be afraid of it. Nobody had asked her to say it was horrible. She had been three weeks being told, one way and another, that if she loved the place she must hate the other, and she had half believed it, and it was not so.

• • •

She came back on Sunday with the plan in her head and a letter in her pocket, and found, as she had known she would, that it needed her drum.

It was a simple plan. She worked it out on the truck, on the road, in the thin light, with the child asleep across her knees. The top of the school lane was no good. It was too far and too steep, and too many of them could not walk it. The truck should stop at the bend, where the river road ran flat and wide for forty yards, and the people from the river houses could come to it on their own legs or on a cart. The old man could be carried down his nine steps by two lads with a chair and wheeled to the bend, in a barrow, with his

hens. It was four hundred yards. It could be done in twenty minutes. It would need the truck to wait. It would need two carts, and a rope, and six strong people, and an hour, and a good deal of luck.

It would need the whole bed of the truck, the full length, to take the people and their bags and a bale of blankets and a chair.

And June had written, on the first Monday run, in her small clear hand: *H.'s drum, 6 places.*

It was the drum. It was the great old steel machine in the laundry with the iron door and the belt, which had cost her mother's uncle a year's wages and her six years' work to keep running, and which was the whole of her living. June had put it on the first truck. She had done it without asking, the way she did everything, out of plain good sense, and had put a question mark in pencil on the list beside it, because she did not know.

Helen sat with the child's head on her lap and looked at the road going by, the grey stones, the thin brown grass, the long low shape of the ridge. She thought of the drum on the bed of the truck with a tarpaulin over it, going away down the road, to a place with a clean tiled bath and a woman in a net who would give you soup. She thought of what it would do to the bed of the truck. She thought of the old man's hens.

She did not decide. She sat there. She thought, clearly: not yet. I'll give them the plan. I'll not give them the drum. They can do without it for a day. And then she thought: no, they can't. And she did not turn it over again, because she knew perfectly well what she would find.

15

The assurance

She told Patrick the whole of it on Friday night, in bed, in the dark, with the socks on the chair.

He had been pleased about the socks. He had put them on at once, over his bare feet, and stood in the lamplight turning one foot and then the other like a man in new shoes, and said they were the best heels he had ever had on him. Then she had told him the rest. She said it as she had said it to herself on the truck, in order, in a flat voice: the engineer, the cat, the questions, the lowering. The inspectors. The rooms. *I won't say it's safe and I won't say it's going to fail.* She told him that the man had said more likely a nuisance than a catastrophe. She told him the next thing too, that the bet was not the right way to think about it, and that the question was what she would do if it were. She had thought that she would leave that part out. It had come out with the rest.

He lay beside her and said nothing for a long time. His feet in the new wool were warm against her shin.

"What will you tell them?" said Patrick.

"What he said."

"All of it?"

"It's in a letter. They can read it."

"That's not what I asked." But he put his hand on her hair, and she understood that he would not say any more tonight, and was grateful, and was ashamed of being grateful.

• • •

She told them on Saturday at ten, in the room behind the store, and it went differently from the way she had planned.

There were four of them: June at the table with her ledger, Martin by the stove with his arms folded, Ben on the wooden crate in the corner with his elbows on his knees, and herself. She had meant to read the letter aloud. It was typed, in six numbered paragraphs, on thick cream paper, in a form that nobody could have argued with. She took it out of the satchel and laid it on the table in front of June, flat, and then she did not read it. She heard her own voice begin to tell it instead, in the plain brisk dry way she used on the apron, and she listened to it as one listens to somebody else.

"He'd lower the lake," said Ruth. "He said so. Slowly, over days. He said it's what he would do, if it were his. He can't say whether the dam's sound. He can't say it from there. He wants the drains looked at, all of them, properly, and he wants a gauge in each. He's offered to send two inspectors. Ten days, maybe less. He can find rooms, in the district. There's a hostel, and two school halls. There's a clinic. He can lend a pump." She stopped, drew breath. "He can't get the generation back. He said that plainly. It's not a thing anyone would do this winter."

"Did he say it's going to fail?" said Martin.

"No."

"Did he say it's likely?"

"He said if I asked him to bet, he'd say it was more likely a nuisance than a catastrophe."

It was the truth. She heard it come out whole and clean, and saw it go across the room to the three faces like a thing thrown, and saw them take it. She had said it exactly. She had left out nothing,

strictly speaking, that she had been asked. She had only not said the sentence after.

June wrote it down. She did it slowly, in her small tidy hand, with her tongue between her teeth, and Ruth watched the pen go across the page and make the words she had said: *more likely a nuisance than a catastrophe.* It looked quite different written. It looked solid. It looked like a thing a person could put in a pocket.

"So it's a precaution," said June.

"It's a precaution."

"I can say that."

"You can say he advised it as a precaution."

"I can say there's no sign it's about to fail?"

She hesitated. She had the letter under her hand, and she knew what the letter said. It did not say that. It did not say the opposite either. It said that no remote assessment could determine the condition of the structure, and that the engineer would not, on the evidence available, advise that it was safe or unsafe. It was a careful letter. She had read it in the market, on a wall, with a bag of socks.

"He didn't say it was about to," said Ruth.

June wrote that down too.

• • •

Martin had a number he wanted. He asked for it quietly, in the same reasonable voice.

"I'm not asking for a promise," he said. "I'm asking for a number." He did not look at her. "Eleven on the books, a machine I still owe on, a district order a fortnight late and a customer who's heard the word precaution and gone. Give me a month and I'll cost it. Give me six weeks and I'll cost that. A bad number I can plan round, Ruth. 'We'll see' I can't."

"There isn't one."

"There's always one."

"There isn't," said Ruth. "That's what the man said. It's the whole of what he said. There's a thing we don't know and we've got to find out, and it'll take as long as it takes. Ten days for the inspectors. Then the drains. Then—" She heard herself lift a hand, and put it down. "Then we'll know more. I'd say a month. I'd say not before that. I'd say there's time."

"There's time."

"There's time to do it properly," said Ruth. "That's what I'd say."

It was not what she had meant to say. She had meant to say that there was no time at all, or that she did not know, or that the inspectors might come in ten days and say lower it tomorrow. She had meant to say what she had said in bed. It had gone another way as she opened her mouth. She saw Martin let out his breath, and his shoulders drop an inch, and she saw something in June's face ease, slightly, around the eyes, and she thought: I have just given them something. She thought: it was not a lie.

Ben had not spoken. He sat on the crate in the corner with his hands between his knees, looking at the stove. She could not see his face. She waited for him to say it, for the clear flat voice she had known since he was nine to say the thing that she had not: *he said lower it*. She waited for it with her whole body, as for a blow.

"What do you want me to tell them?" said June.

"Tell them," said Ruth, "that the engineer has advised a precaution. That it's being looked into. That there's no sign of immediate trouble. That we'll know more in a month." She breathed. "Tell them nobody's to move who doesn't have to."

"Nobody's to move who doesn't have to," said June. She wrote it.

Then Ben stood up. He did it without a sound. He crossed the room to the door and stopped with his hand on the latch, and for a moment she thought he would turn round.

"I'll be at the station," he said, and went out.

• • •

She could not have said, afterward, how she got through the afternoon.

She went home at four. Patrick was in the shop. She could hear him through the wall, the scrape of a scoop and the small cheerful murmur of his voice, the bell on the door; and she stood in the kitchen with her coat on and her hands on the back of a chair, and when the bell rang again and the shop was quiet she went through.

He was behind the counter, wiping the scale. It was a thing he did when the shop was empty and he was thinking. He did not look up.

"Lodging-house woman's been," he said. "And the one from the bend. And Pete's wife." He put down the cloth. "They've all heard it from June. They've heard it's only a precaution. They've heard there's no sign of trouble. They'd like to know if it's true."

"It's what he said."

"Is it?"

"It's what I said." She heard her own voice, thin. "Tell them. When they ask. They'll ask you, you've the face people believe. If you say it's a precaution it'll hold. If you say not to worry—"

"I won't."

He said it simply. He did not raise his voice. He picked up the cloth and folded it in four and laid it on the scale, and then he looked at her, and it was the look she had known for thirty-five years and had never once been afraid of.

"You told me different last night," said Patrick.

"I told you what he said."

"You told me all of it, love. The bet, and what he'd do if it were. You didn't tell June that. She's said 'no sign of immediate trouble' to half the town, and it's in her book, in your words." He did not say it angrily. "I'm not saying you lied. I'm saying you've given me one thing and her another, and I can't sell either across a counter. I've sold a good deal I didn't believe, I'll admit. Never to someone's face who'd paid for the flour."

"I didn't say it so that they'd—"

"I know you didn't." He came round the end of the counter and put his hands on her shoulders, large and warm and slightly floury, and she felt them through her coat. "You were frightened, and you wanted something to hand them that wouldn't break. It's not a wicked thing." He looked at her. "I'm still not saying it for you."

"Patrick."

"I'll sell her flour. I'll tell her what I know, if she asks me straight. I'll tell her I don't know. It's the truest thing I've got." His mouth moved, a very little. "I'm not a good liar. You always said."

• • •

He went to cards at seven.

It was Saturday. He had gone to cards at the back of the cold store on Saturdays for eleven years, with three other men and a bottle, and she had never thought of it as anything but the weather. He came down the stair in his good jacket, with the green socks on, and stood in the kitchen door, and did not go.

"I'll stay."

"You won't."

"If you want me to."

"I don't," said Ruth. It was a lie, and she had said it before she knew. "Go. It's Saturday. You always go."

"I won't be late," said Patrick.

"Take your scarf."

"I've a scarf." He kissed her on the top of the head, lightly, as one touches a sleeping child, and went. She heard the door, and his boots on the cobbles, and a long way down the lane the first notes of a whistle, flat, and then not.

She stood in the kitchen with the lamp lit. It was quiet. She had a right to be angry and could not find the person to be angry at. She had no claim on him. She knew that perfectly well. A man was entitled to his cards. A man was entitled not to tell a lie across a

counter. She had no more right to demand he stay at home with her in her fear than she had had to ask him to say a thing he did not believe, and she had done both in the same hour, and she stood at the stove with her hands on the rail and was angry and lonely and ashamed, all at once, like three things brought in on the same tray.

The rain began at nine.

It began very softly, a few light taps on the window, and then the long steady whisper on the roof, which she knew as she knew her own pulse. She went to the door and opened it. The yard was dark and the air smelled of wet stone. It was coming down straight, in the lamplight from the next house, in long fine silver threads, without wind. It would be a wet spell. It would go on a week, perhaps more. She stood on the step with her arms folded and watched it fall on the lane and the roofs and the long black shoulder of the hill, and tried not to think of the lake, which was taking it, patiently, as it had taken everything, and was not going anywhere.

16

A *dry joint running*

Ben had painted the wall himself, last March, so he knew it was dry.

It was the fourth block joint along the gallery from the east end, a vertical seam in the concrete where one great pour had met the next sixty years ago, a hand's width wide and filled with a black bitumen that had cracked and been patched and cracked again. He had done the whole stretch with a brush and a bucket of white limewash on a wet afternoon in March because there was nothing else to do and because his mother had said, in passing, that a white wall was easier to read. It was. He had stood on the grating with the brush in his hand and watched the joint go from black to a faintly bluish grey and thought nothing whatever about it. It had been bone dry. He had touched it. It was dry the way a stone in a drawer is dry.

On the fourth morning of the rain it was running.

He saw it from thirty feet away, in the first grey light from the high vent, by the shine. It was not a drip. It was a thin steady bright thread, from a point a little above his head to the foot of the wall, and it had cut a clean line through the limewash the whole way down and left a stain behind it the colour of weak tea. A small dark pool lay in the gutter below, and it was moving. It had been moving for some time. He stood in the middle of the gallery in his oilskin with the lamp in his hand and heard his own breath go in and out,

and for the first minute did nothing at all, because it was one of those things that one has been told and has not believed.

Then he knelt, and put his fingers in the water. It was cold. It was only water. It ran between them as water does.

He had a tin in his pocket, a small flat one that had held pastilles, because he had learned to carry one. He held it under the thread. It filled in what felt like forty seconds, by his own pulse, to the brim, and he counted it again, and it filled again. It did not go faster. It did not go slower. It simply ran, steadily, from a place in the dark of the wall that nobody had ever looked at, into a gutter built to carry it away.

• • •

He sent the Aldous boy for his mother, and she came in twenty minutes with her hair wet and her boots untied.

She did not say anything. She walked up the gallery to the fourth joint with the lamp in her left hand and stopped in front of it, and he watched her look. She looked as she looked at everything, with her whole face, first fast and then slowly. She put her hand flat on the wall beside the thread. She held it there. She took it away and looked at her palm.

"It's new," she said.

"It was dry in March. I painted it."

"I know you did." She crouched, and looked at the pool, and the stain, and the clean cut line in the limewash. "It's not seepage. It's a run."

"Yes."

"It's coming through the joint, not from the face." She spoke quickly, in a low flat voice. "It's the bitumen. It's let go, there. It's let go in the rain, a bit at a time, and that's the first place it's found." She stopped. "That's a thing you'd expect from a sponge."

"It's not."

"A sponge might—"

"A sponge doesn't start a new tap," said Ben.

He had not meant to say it so. It came out gently, in the voice he used on a seized bolt, and she did not flinch. She went on crouching on the wet grating with the lamp held low in front of her, looking at the water, and it was a long time before she moved.

A joint's seal is what keeps the dam's water out of the gallery. A run where there had been none meant the water had found a way through that was not a drain, and nobody could say how many others it had not yet found.

"What does the east say?" she said.

He had been to the east end first. He told her. The gauge, which had sat at the chalk mark for a fortnight, had crept off it again in the night, a hair and a half, and as he stood there it had gone another. The weir was a full finger above October. It had risen with the rain, as it might, and it had not come down when the rain eased at four. "It's not settling," he said. "It was meant to settle. If it was the flush, and the rock was draining, it should be going down by now, and it's going up. It's going up with the rain."

"The rain's a fact."

"So's the joint."

"It changes it," said Ruth.

"Yes."

"It changes what I told them."

"What did you tell them?"

"That there was time." She did not look at him. "I said it to June. I said it to Martin. I said there'd be time to do it properly, a month, I said I'd say not before that. I said it because I was—" She stopped. She seemed to turn the sentence over and find the other side of it. "I said it because I wanted it to be so. And I didn't know. I've no more idea how much time there is than the cat."

"Neither has he."

"No."

"Neither has anyone." He sat down beside her on the wet grating, with his knees up, and the cold coming through his trousers. He was surprised at how little he wanted to say I told you. "It's only that it's moving now. It wasn't, and it is. It might be a week. It might be a season. It might be that this is the worst it does, and it holds."

"It might."

"I'd lower it."

"I know." She said it very softly. "I've known since the engineer. I think I've known since the pin." She looked at him then, in the lamplight, with her wet hair in her eyes. "You'd like to go and tell them."

"Yes."

"Don't."

"I know."

"Don't ring the bell."

"I won't." He drew a breath. "I did it once. Three men in a control room, and by two o'clock there was a woman moving her mother in a handcart. I'm not saying half of it to whoever's near again." He looked at the water. "All of it, to everybody, same words, same time. River road first." His voice shook, a very little. "Not last."

She looked at him for a long time. Something went across her face, quick and grave, and was gone.

"Then who do you need?" she said.

"Helen," said Ben. "And June."

• • •

Helen was at the drum, with her sleeves rolled to the shoulder, and she did not stop when he came in.

He stood in the laundry door with the rain behind him and watched her work. She was feeding a long grey rope of wet sheeting through the mangle with her back bent and her hair tied in a knot, and her whole body leaned to it, and the machine groaned and the water ran out in a long clear sheet. The room was full of steam and

the smell of lye. On the line above her hung the child's small blue cardigan, dripping.

"I know why you've come," said Helen.

"It's the joint." He had meant to begin by saying sorry. "There's a new one, there's a run on the fourth block joint, it was dry in March. The east gauge is up. We've—"

"I've heard it from the Aldous boy." She did not turn round. "He ran past at seven. He said you were in the gallery with your face the colour of a candle."

"I wanted to tell you before—"

"Before what?"

"Before it got about."

"It's about," said Helen. "It's been about for three weeks."

He took a breath. He had thought about this, on the way, in the rain, in some detail. He had his sentences ready. They were good ones. "I want to say I should have come to you first, Hel. About the first thing. I'd been asked to wait two days and I did wait. I want you to know it wasn't that I thought it didn't matter. It was only that I'd the evidence, and I couldn't not say, and I'd been told to hold it, and I did what I thought was the honest—"

She stopped the mangle.

It was a thing he would remember. She did not do it angrily. She took her hand from the crank and the great steel rollers ran down and stopped, with a long falling groan, and the room filled with the sound of dripping. She stood with her back to him and her wet hands hanging, and he saw the muscles in her shoulders go still.

"You're defending the chart," said Helen.

"I'm not."

"You're explaining why you were right."

"I'm trying to say I'm sorry."

"You've said it. You've said it in a speech." She turned round. She looked tired, and plain, and a good deal older than thirty-four, and there was a streak of grey in the damp hair at her temple that he did

not remember. “I don’t want to know what the chart said. I know what the chart said. I want to know why I heard it from the lodging-house woman.”

“Because—”

“You know where I live.”

He stopped.

“You know where I live,” said Helen. “You’ve eaten at my table. You’ve held my daughter on your shoulders to see the barge. You know it’s the river road, you know it’s the bottom of the hill, you know there’s nothing between me and that wall but a mile of water, and you told three men in a control room and not me.” She did not raise her voice. “I’m not asking why you told them. I’d have told them. I’m asking why you didn’t think of me.”

He stood in the door with the rain on his back.

There was a defence. It was a good one. He could feel it, ready, behind his teeth: that he had been frightened, that he had been in a room, that he had been told to say nothing, that he had meant to come. That he had been young. It was all true. He looked at his sister’s face, with its straight brows and its great tired grey eyes, and found that he could not get any of it into his mouth.

“I forgot you,” said Ben.

She did not move.

“I was thinking about the workshop,” said Ben. “The cold store.”

“I live below them.”

“I know.”

“You knew then.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not a thing I can explain.”

“No.” She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she took a cloth from the hook and wiped her hands, one finger at a time, with great deliberation, and hung it up. Her mouth had gone slightly

crooked. “That’s the first true thing you’ve said to me since October. Sit down. There’s tea.”

• • •

June had a pencil behind her ear and a ration sheet in front of her, and the three of them worked all that afternoon in the back of the store with the rain on the roof.

“We go together,” said Helen. “Not you on your own. Not me. We go at the same time, so nobody hears it from the house next door.”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Six. They’re all up at six.”

“What do we say?” said June.

They looked at it. It was a perfectly fair question, and none of them had an answer, and the rain went on over the roof. Ben thought: this is the thing. This is where I got it wrong, last time, and where my mother got it wrong, and where it’s going to be got wrong again if we’re not careful. He took a fresh bit of paper. He wrote four lines on it, in his square capitals, with the pencil pressed hard, and turned it round so they could read.

We do not know if the dam is safe.

This is what we have seen.

This is what we are doing.

This is what we would like you to do.

June read it. She read it through once, and took the pencil from behind her ear, and crossed out nothing. She put it down. She looked at Ben, over her glasses, for a long moment, with her sharp round tired face and her eyes the colour of old tea.

“That’s the first thing I’ve seen written down,” she said, “that I could say to a person’s face.”

“It doesn’t say how long.”

"No," said June. "It says what you don't know. That's why I could." She picked up the sheet and held it at arm's length and then close, and he saw her lips move. "Write it out fair, Ben. Six copies. I'll do the people. Helen, you'll do the road. Don't any of you say a word to a soul till six."

17

The available wages

The truck had a third of a drum, and the driver told them so before anyone had climbed up.

He was the lean silent man who had always driven Martin's flatbed, and he stood at the cab door in the wet yard with his hand on the roof, looking at the sky as if the number were written there. "A third," he said. "That's to the station and back, and the hoist on the bed, and a pump. It's the road I don't like. It's the switchback. It'll want first all the way." He looked at Ruth. "If it takes more than the one trip, there's no second."

"It'll take one," said Martin.

"I'm only saying."

They loaded it in the rain. It took an hour. The hoist was the workshop's big chain block on its steel carriage, and the pump was the three-inch trash pump from the river job, which Tessa and two of the lads walked up a pair of planks onto the bed and lashed down with ratchet straps, swearing. Ruth stood under the shed eave with her collar up and watched the tarpaulin go over, and thought how strange it was to be carried, for once, instead of carrying. She had not asked to go. She had said she needed to see the road. It was the truth, and it was also a way to be in a truck.

Tessa climbed up beside her on the bed and wedged herself against the hoist with her back to the cab. She had her hands in her sleeves. She did not look at anyone. "You'll be wet," she said.

"So will you."

"I'm used to it." She had a letter in her fist. Ruth saw it only because the paper was clean, a white square in all that grey, folded in three, with a stamp on it. She put it away inside her jacket without looking at it.

The engine caught. The truck lurched out of the yard onto the lane in low gear, with the load swaying behind, and began, slowly, to climb.

• • •

The switchback was a mile of loose stone and standing water cut into the side of the hill, and the truck took it in first with the engine labouring and the rain drumming on the cab roof.

At the third bend the truck stopped. A culvert had gone. The whole outer edge of the road lay in a brown fan over the slope below, and the near wheel stood a foot from the edge of it, and the driver got down and looked at it for a long time without speaking. Martin got down on the other side. They stood in the downpour looking at the missing road with the care of men looking at a bad tooth.

"We'll go round on the inside," said Martin. "Slow."

"If it goes—"

"It'll not go." He came round to the back of the truck and looked up at them under the dripping tarpaulin, and it was only then that she saw how tired his face was, and how kind. "Ruth. A word."

She got down. They stood together at the tailboard in the rain, with the long wet roar of the hillside in their ears and the truck ticking beside them, and he took his cap off and wiped his forehead on his sleeve and put it on again.

"I've told three of them to go home," he said.

"Martin—"

"Not for good. Till we know." He said it very quietly. "Pete's one. The two lads from the shed. I'll pay them till Friday and then I'll say." He looked at her. "I can carry eleven people a month. Six for two. If it's till spring I can't carry anyone, and I owe more on the machine under that sheet than the shop's worth. A district order I can't finish, a customer gone, the bar in couplings, and the power going."

"I know."

"I'll not say it to them straight. They'd not take it. I'll say it's provisional." His mouth twisted. "It's not a word I like. It's a word for a thing you've already decided."

She wanted to say something. She stood in the rain and could find nothing in her mouth that was not a lie or a comfort, and she knew by now that they were not very different. "I can't give you a date," she said.

"I know you can't." He put his hand on her arm, briefly, a heavy wet hand, and took it away. "Say it was said, then. Somebody ought to, before I have to count it up in a ditch."

• • •

Tessa waited until the truck was moving again.

It crept round the missing curve on the inside edge with the wheels spitting stone and the tarpaulin cracking in the wind, and when it was through and the road lay straight ahead, she took the letter out of her jacket and held it between her knees, and Ruth saw that her hands were shaking.

"It came on Friday," said Tessa. "By the driver. From the man at the river works."

"The yard at the district."

"A place. From the first of the month." She opened it. It was a good letter, in a clean upright hand, on thick paper with a printed heading, and Ruth could see the figures from where she sat. A weekly wage. A bed in a hostel with a stove. A canteen, three meals.

Tools, which she would not have to buy. “They want an answer by Friday. Mr Dyer hasn’t seen it.”

“Are you going to show him?”

“I don’t know.” She folded it. “I thought I’d tell you first. I don’t know why. You’re not— you’re not anyone, in it, you’re only the one I thought of.” She laughed, very shortly, with no breath in it. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s only that I like him. He’s a rotten businessman and he’s very good, and he’s let me. Nobody else would. I came to him when I was eighteen and I couldn’t read a bore, and he’s given me a bench and a key.” She drew her knees up and put her chin on them, and said into her sleeve: “And I can’t stay if there’s no work. It’s not that I’d have to go. It’s that I’d be a mouth. I’d be a person he was paying out of what he hadn’t got. I’d stand there every morning being paid for nothing and I’d know.”

“Is that what you want to tell him?”

“No.”

“What do you want?”

She took a long time. The truck lurched, and the hoist rang, and the rain came in under the tarpaulin in a fine cold slant.

“I want to be asked,” said Tessa. “I want somebody to say stay. Not because there’s work. Because I’m useful.” She looked up, and her face was hot and wet and furious. “That’s a stupid thing to want. I know it is. I’m twenty-two and it’s very bad manners.”

“It’s not stupid.”

“But you can’t tell me to.”

“No,” said Ruth. “I can’t. It’s not mine to say.” She heard how it sounded, and said, because it was true, and because the girl had held out her whole stubborn heart in a wet square of paper: “I’d like you to stay. For what it’s worth. I’d not say it if I didn’t think I’d be the worse for the other.”

Tessa said nothing. She looked at the letter in her hands for a long moment, and then, with great care, she put it back in her jacket, and the truck went on up the hill.

• • •

The lad had missed the four o'clock reading, and he did not seem sorry.

He was one of the station's two, a big slow cheerful boy of nineteen with large red ears and a way of looking at his boots, and he stood in the machine hall doorway in a pool of his own wet while Ben held up the log. It had a gap in it. It was one line, in the ruled column, where somebody should have written the weir and the east gauge and the time, and hadn't.

"I was on a roof," said the lad.

"You were on the log."

"I was on the lodging-house woman's roof. She's a slate gone, over the stove. It was dripping on the kettle." He said it mildly, with the air of one explaining a plain fact of nature. "She's three guests Thursday. I said I'd do it. It was an hour. It was two, in the end, the ladder slid."

"There's a reading every hour," said Ben, "and I told you."

"I know you did."

Ruth stood at the back of the hall with her wet jacket dripping on the floor and watched them. She had come in behind the truck. She had said she wanted to see the station and had meant it, and now she stood by the cold turbine casing and watched her son hold up a gap in a page and a boy of nineteen look at his boots, and she knew precisely what she ought to do. She ought to take the log from Ben and say, in her brisk voice, the one from the apron, that it was not acceptable. She ought to say that nobody on the station left the station in a reading hour for any roof in the world. She had said it a hundred times. It had always worked.

She opened her mouth.

"Who pays you?" she said.

The lad looked up.

"Not me. Who? I've no money. the station's months behind on wages, I've not had a coin since September, I've been writing it on a sheet." She heard her own voice, level and dry. "Martin's paying his own by the hour and not for much longer. The lodging-house woman gives you a dinner. She's a roof, it's on your way home. What do I say?"

"You could sack me," said the lad.

"I could."

"I'd still do the roof." He said it with perfect good humour. He seemed to have thought of it and found it no great matter. "I'm not saying I'd not do the log. I'll do the night, if you like. I'll do a double. I only think she'd have been wet."

It was true. That was the whole of it. Ruth looked at him, at the great red ears and the honest bewildered face, and knew that she had no sanction left. She had never paid him. She had never been able to. She had run the station for nine years on a mixture of habit and shame and a rule nobody had thought to question, and the rule had held because nobody was asked to choose between it and a woman's kettle.

"Do the double," she said. "And tell Ben before you go on a roof."

"I will."

"And tell her to have the slate seen to properly."

"She's nobody to do it."

"Then tell her you'll do it properly, on a dry day, after your shift," said Ruth, and heard Ben, behind her, let out a very small breath that was not quite a laugh.

• • •

June was standing at the school gate with a bundle of blankets in her arms when the truck came back down.

It was dusk, and the rain had thinned to a fine sleet. She stood under the wall by the lane in her good scarf, in the grey light, with the blankets held up against her chest like a baby, and the driver put his foot on the brake without being asked. Ruth saw her from the bed. She saw the white head turn, and the sharp tired face look up, and she was down over the tailboard before the truck had stopped.

"I'll walk," she said to Martin, through the window. "It's only to the store."

"You'll be wet."

"I've been wet since Saturday."

They stood in the lane, the two of them, with the blankets between them, and the truck went on a few yards and stopped to wait with its engine running. June did not say anything. She was looking at Ruth's face. It was a look that had gone through a good many faces, in a good many kitchens, and she held it steadily.

"I can't tell them to wait till spring," said Ruth.

June did not move.

"I said a month. I said there was time. It's in your book." She heard her own voice come out low and rough, as a thing comes out of a long-stopped pipe. "I don't know that. There's a joint running in the gallery that was dry on Monday, and the gauge is going up again. I can't go on saying wait."

"No," said June.

"I should have said so on Saturday."

"Yes."

"Will you tell me why I didn't?"

It was a thing she had not meant to ask. June looked at her, with the sleet in her white hair and her arms full of grey wool, and for a moment said nothing at all.

"I was going to ask you that," she said. "You said different words to me than you'd said to Patrick. I know, because he told me. He didn't mean to. He said it over the flour. He said he'd been told all of

it and I'd been told a part." She said it without heat. "I'd like to know why. Not the weather. Not the dam. Why you chose."

She had expected to want to say it was the rain. It was the first thing that came, and she saw it go by, clearly, as one watches a bird cross a window. It would have been true. It had been a hard week. She had been frightened, and tired, and alone, and a good many things had gone wrong that had nothing to do with her.

"Because I was afraid you'd move the whole town," said Ruth. "And I couldn't be the one who did that. I wanted to give you something that wouldn't break." She drew breath. "I'm good at it. Giving people the part they can hold. Nine years, and mostly it was kind. This time I was wrong."

June looked at her. The sleet was falling in a light grey slant between them, and a long way off, down the hill, a dog was barking, and the truck ticked over in the dusk.

"That's a good deal more honest than what you gave me on Saturday," said June.

"I know."

"I've told forty people there was no sign of trouble. In your words. I said it to a woman with a baby." She shifted the blankets. "I'll have to take it back."

"I'd like to do it myself."

"I thought you might." She looked at the bundle in her arms, and then up at Ruth, and the lines at the corners of her eyes shifted a very little. It was not a smile. "Tomorrow. At the school. I'll ring the bell."

"Thank you."

"Don't," said June. "I'm not doing it for you." She hitched the blankets higher. "Go and get on your truck. You're standing in the road."

18

Supper at the school

The first-winter supper had been held in the old schoolroom on the last Thursday of November for as long as anyone could say, and nobody had thought to cancel it.

That was the strange part. Ruth stood in the doorway at six with her hat in her hand and the cold of the lane at her back and looked at what the town had done, in the middle of all of it, without a word said. The trestles were up. They ran the length of the room in two long rows under the strings of faded paper suns, laid with the good cloths, the ones with the darned corners, and every table had its jug of water and its lamp. There were pies. There were pickled beets in a great brown crock, and a ham, and a cheese in a cloth, and on the trestle at the end a cake the size of a cartwheel, with apples on it, which Patrick had been up since four to make. The children had done the decorations. They had cut out boats from the backs of ration sheets and pinned them in rows along the windows, and in the middle of the wall, over the stove, someone had drawn the dam in coloured chalk, very large, with a rainbow over it and a small round sun.

She stood and looked at the drawing. It was a good dam. It had a gallery in it, a long curved row of dots, and a great many tiny fishes.

"It's only the supper," said Patrick, at her shoulder. He had a tray of pies on one arm and flour to the elbows, and he said it low, with his eyes on the room. "I thought we ought to. People wanted it. Children had been told." He shifted the tray. "I've said nothing to anyone. June'll ring when it's time. Go and sit down."

"I've to tell them."

"After the pie."

"Patrick—"

"After the pie," he said. "Please. It's only an hour. Let them have the pie."

She let them have the pie. She did not know, afterward, whether it was kindness or cowardice, and thought it was probably the same thing that had made her say *a month*. She took her place at the end of the second table, between Ben and a boy of six with jam on his face, and ate a slice of pie without tasting it, and listened to the noise.

It was a good noise. It rose and fell round her under the paper suns, the roar of a hundred and twenty people who had been cold and frightened for three weeks and had been given for one evening a warm room and a meal, and had decided, without anyone suggesting it, to be glad. Kit told a long story about a ferret. Martin sat at the top table with a child on each knee and a plate of ham he was not eating, and listened to the goat man explain something about a doe. Marit sat between two old men with her sleeves rolled, cutting a pie for both. Tessa was singing, in the corner by the stove, a thin flat tune with a great deal of enjoyment, and a small girl had climbed on the bench beside her to conduct. Helen's child sat at the far end with her chin on her fists, watching the cake.

She thought: this is the thing. This is what it was for. She had thought it about her own bed and her own kitchen and a stove that drew, and had never thought it about a room.

At seven June rang the bell.

• • •

It was the school's own bell, a small brass handbell with a wooden grip, and it made a high flat sound that went through the room like a thread. The singing stopped. The noise went down in stages, from the top table to the bottom, and the last thing to stop was the baby. June stood at the stove under the chalk dam with the bell in her fist and her white head up, in her good dark dress and the brooch she had worn at every supper for thirty years, and said, loudly, that she was sorry, but she had something to say before the cake.

"Ruth has it," said June. "She's asked to. She's going to say it all. I'll ask you to let her finish."

She stood up.

She had her hat in her hand. She did not know why. She set it down on the table, beside the jam boy's plate, and stood with her hands at her sides in the great warm yellow room, and a hundred and twenty faces turned up to her in the lamplight, round and pink and attentive, with the pie still on their forks. She had stood in this room a week before, and it had gone badly, and she had not known why. She looked at the faces and thought she knew now. It had gone badly because she had said everything she knew and none of what she feared. She was not going to do that again. She took a breath.

"I was wrong on Saturday," said Ruth.

The room did not move.

"I went to the district. I saw the engineer. I came back and I told June and Martin what he said, and it was true, as far as it went. I left out the rest." She heard her voice, thin and a little too loud in the quiet. "He said he would lower the lake. He said he can't tell me whether the dam is safe. He said he wouldn't guess. I told June there was no sign of trouble. That was a thing I said so that you'd be easier. It wasn't the truth. The truth is that I don't know. It might be a drain that's been telling me small lies for years. It might be something worse. Ben found a joint in the gallery on Wednesday that was dry in March and is running now. I can't tell you what it means."

She told them what was in the letter, plainly, as she had read it on the market wall: the inspectors, the rooms, the pump, the cores through the toe. She told them what it would cost, in the order it would cost it: the power first, then the workshop, the cold store, the clinic's heat, the pump on the hill. She told them she would lower the lake, slowly, and that she did not know how long.

"It could be a month," she said. "It could be till spring. It could be a root in a pipe and a great fuss about nothing, and I'd be glad of it." She looked down the long room. "I wouldn't bet on it. I told you before what I'd bet on, and I was wrong."

Nobody spoke. The lamps burned. Somewhere at the back a child began to say something, and was hushed.

The goat man stood up.

He did it slowly, at the third table, a long dry patient man in a clean collar, with a napkin still tucked into it. He did not look angry. He had the look of a man at the end of a long field, who has been told there is something in the hedge.

"I asked what I'd see," he said. "If it went."

"Yes."

"I was told I'd be told."

"I can't tell you what you'd see." She said it as exactly as she could. "I can only say what I'd look for. If it were going wrong, it would go wrong in the drains first. The water at the toe would run brown, instead of clear. That's the first thing. It might be an hour before anything else. It might be a day. It might be a thing that never happens." She swallowed. "It's all the warning anyone could promise you, and I'm not sure it's a promise."

He nodded. He stood a moment longer, looking at her, and sat down.

It was quiet for a long time. The stove ticked. Then a woman's voice, from the second table, not loud: the woman from the bend, with the baby on her shoulder and a face pinched with sleeplessness, who had asked her once, in a shop, if it would be a bad winter.

"Ruth."

"Yes."

"One thing," she said, "and say it straight." She did not stand. She held the sleeping child against her with one arm, and her eyes were very bright. "If it were your granddaughter. If she lived on the river road, in the house at the bend. Would you leave her there?"

It was a plain question. It was the one question there had never been any way to answer, and she heard the whole room draw breath to hear what she would say. She looked down the long tables to the far end, where a small girl in a blue cardigan was sitting straight with her chin on her fists, watching her grandmother with enormous grave attention, as one watches somebody about to jump.

"No," said Ruth.

She had not decided to say it. It was out before she knew. It lay in the air of the warm room, a small hard clean word like a stone dropped in a bucket, and she stood there with her hands at her sides and understood, coldly and all at once, what she had said. She had said no. She had said it in front of a hundred and twenty people. She had said that if it were her own she would take her out. It was the answer to a question nobody had put in words: whether she believed it. She did.

"Thank you," said the woman from the bend.

She got up. She did it quietly, with the baby in her arm, and gathered the shawl round it, and went down the room between the tables toward the door, with her back straight. Nobody spoke. Nobody stopped her. At the door she looked back, once, at the table where her husband sat with his mouth a little open, and he stood, and they went out together into the dark.

• • •

After that it went as water goes.

She could not have said who moved first. There was a scrape of a bench, and another. A man put down his fork. A woman bent and

said something into a child's ear, and the child, who had been looking at the cake, turned, and began to cry. The lodging-house woman got up and went, with her coat half on. Two of the river-road households went together, wordlessly, in a little hurried knot, with their children by the hand, and the door banged and the cold came in. June had the bell in her fist again. She rang it. She stood by the stove under the chalk dam with her small white head up and rang it as hard as she could, and the high flat note went over the room and nobody turned.

"Please," said June. "There's to be an order. We've made a plan. There's the truck, there's a list, nobody's to run in the dark—"

A chair went over.

"Sit down, please. It's not tonight. It's not tonight, it's only a precaution, nobody's saying it's tonight—"

Helen came up the room with her daughter by the hand.

She had her coat on. The child's was buttoned wrong, and she had put a hand into her pocket and brought out a small flat lump wrapped in a cloth, a piece of the apple cake, and was holding it carefully in front of her like a candle. Helen stopped in front of the table. She looked at Ruth. She did not say anything for what seemed a long time, and Ruth saw that her face was white and exact and not at all angry.

"I'll take the truck on Monday," she said. "Both of us. I'll tell June the rest in the morning."

"Helen—"

"I've decided." She spoke very quietly. "I'll tell June in the morning. I wanted you to hear it from me." Her mouth moved. "It's what you did. You said it straight. I'd not have thought you could." She looked at the child, and then back. "Come on, love."

"Gran," said the child.

"Yes?"

"I saved you a bit." She held out the cloth. "It's the apple bit. I thought you'd not got any."

She took it. It was warm from the child's pocket. She stood with it in her palm and could not say anything at all, and then they were gone, down the long emptying room between the tables, with the child looking back over her shoulder until the door shut.

• • •

Patrick had begun to wrap the food.

She saw him do it without understanding at first. He was going along the trestles with a pile of cloths over his arm and a tin tray, quickly, in his flour-stained apron, taking up the pies and the slabs of ham and the heels of bread and laying them in the squares of cloth and tying the corners in knots, one after another, with the small deft economy of a man who had done a great many parcels. He did not say anything. He gave them to people as they went by. He put one into the hands of a woman with a toddler, and one into an old man's, and one, without a word, into the lodging-house woman's, who stopped in the door with her coat half on and looked at it, and looked at him, and took it, and went out.

"It'll only go to waste," said Patrick, to nobody, to the room. "Take it. Please. Take it."

He cut the great cake in twenty pieces and gave them all away.

She watched him do it from where she stood by the end table. She thought she ought to help. She did not move. It was bright in the room. There were still a few left, at the far end by the stove, the old and the slow, being helped into their coats by Marit and one of the lads, and June had given up the bell and stood with her back to the wall and her hands over her face. And then there were none. The door banged for the last time, and the cold came in along the floor, and Patrick went out after the last of them with the empty tray under his arm, and stopped on the threshold, and looked back at her, and went.

She was alone in the lit room.

It was quiet. The stove ticked. On every table there were the remains of the supper, the half-eaten pies and the dishes of beet and the jugs of water, and the cloths pulled crooked by the hands that had left them, and chairs standing at angles where people had risen. The paper boats hung along the windows. The coloured chalk dam looked down from the wall over the stove with its tiny fishes, and its rainbow, and its great round sun.

She thought: I should clear. There were a hundred and twenty plates. They would want washing, and stacking, and the cloths folding, and the trestles taking down and carrying to the shed, and the lamps put out one by one. It was a perfectly ordinary job. She had done it every year for thirty years. She stood by the end table with the apple cake in a cloth in her left hand and took up a plate with her right, a thick white one with a blue rim, and held it, and looked at it.

There was a smear of jam on it. There was a small curved bite in the crust.

She stood with it in her hand for a long time, in the light of the lamps, and did not put it down, and could not make herself begin.

PART FOUR

Opening the outlet

19

A truck that is not coming

The truck did not come at seven, and by eight Helen knew why before anyone told her.

It was the axle. She had known for two years that it was the axle. Everyone had, in the way one knows a tooth is going to go, and had driven on it, and it had gone on the third bend of the switchback at ten to seven on Monday morning, in the rain, with the driver at the wheel and his third of a drum and nothing on the bed but a coil of rope. It was the Aldous boy who told her. He came down the river road at a run with his cap in his fist and water streaming off his chin, and stopped at the laundry door, bent double, with his hand on his side. "It's the track rod," he said. "It's snapped. It's sitting at the bend with its nose in the bank. He says he can't move it. He says it's a day. He says it's two."

"A day."

"Or two. Martin's gone up with Tessa. They've got the jack." He gulped. "Is it your drum? Is the drum going?"

She looked at the great steel machine behind her in the steam, with its iron door and its belt and its six years of work. She looked at the sacks stacked by the wall, the carpet bag by the door, the child's coat on its peg. She had been up since four. She had written out the whole thing the night before on the back of a ration sheet, in two

columns, as June did: the houses, the carts, the hours, the steps. The old man at seven. The woman at the bend at half past. The goats. The truck at the bend at eight, waiting an hour. It had been a good plan. It had been the only one, and it had needed the truck.

"No," said Helen. "The drum isn't going."

She said it quietly. She heard it come out of her, and the Aldous boy stare, and she took her hand off the cold rim of the machine and found that it was perfectly steady. She had thought that this would be the worst of it. She had lain awake over it, in the dark, with her daughter breathing beside her. Now it was only a thing to say. She put the sacks of laundry back on the shelf where they had been, and took the pencil from behind her ear, and went to the door and stood looking out at the rain.

"All right," said Helen. "Then we walk."

• • •

The whole thing had to be done again from the beginning, and she did it standing in the lane with the pencil and a wet piece of paper.

The truck had been going to take them down to the district, thirty-four people in two runs, with the old man and his chair and a bale of blankets and the drum in the middle like a great iron bride. It would not. There was no vehicle. There was a handcart, and two barrows, and Martin's lad with a mule, and the school hall at the top of the hill, which was already full and which June had said, in a voice like flint, would take nineteen more if it had to. That was where the river road would go. They would walk up. They would carry what could not walk, in the carts, by the lane, and they would do it in the rain, and the district would be a matter for Wednesday, when the axle was mended.

She wrote it down. She crossed out the truck. She wrote *school* in its place, and underlined it twice, and under it, small, *carts: 3. barrows: 2. mule: 1. lads: need 6.*

Then she did the thing she had not been able to do the night before. She took her own name off the list.

"You're not going," said the Aldous boy, with enormous eyes.

"I'm going. I'm not going on that." She did not look up. "I'm going when it's done. I'll see them up the hill first. All of them." She folded the sheet in four. "And my daughter's not going down to the district. Not yet. I'd meant her to go on the truck with me. She'll go up to her grandfather's."

"To Patrick's?"

"It's dry. It's on the hill. He's got a room." She drew breath. "Go and tell him she'll be there by nine. Tell him she's a blanket and a cup, and she'll be no trouble, and she'll ask a good many questions."

• • •

She took the child up the hill at half past eight with a bag over her shoulder and the rain running off both their hoods.

They did not talk. The child had been told what had happened to the truck and had received the news with a look of grave interior reckoning, as one receives a change in the rules of a game, and had said only, "Is the drum going to be wet?" It was the sort of question she asked. Helen had said that the drum would be under a sheet. The child had said that she hoped it would not be lonely.

Patrick stood in the shop door in his apron with a lamp in his hand. He had put a stool by the stove, with a cushion on it. He had cleared a corner behind the counter, with a quilt on the floor and a small flat tin of buttons laid out, which Helen recognised as the one that had been hers at five, and he bent down at once and put both hands on his granddaughter's shoulders, and looked at her gravely.

"I've a lot of people coming in for flour," he said. "And I'm a bad shopkeeper and a very good jam-maker. I'll need somebody to guard the till and tell me when anyone steals a bun."

"Is that a job?"

"It's the best job in the shop."

The child considered this. “Can I have a button?”

“You can have three. I’ll put them on the books.” He looked up at Helen over the child’s head, and she saw in his face what she had not seen for three weeks, a plain, shut, steady attention without a single joke in it. “Go on,” said Patrick. “Go and see to your old man. I’ll have her till you come.”

“Dad.”

“I know.” He did not move. “I know, love. Go.”

• • •

The old man was carried down his nine steps at ten past nine, in a kitchen chair, by two of Martin’s lads, and he said nothing the whole way.

He had dressed for it. He wore his good coat and his hat, and he sat straight in the chair with his hands on his knees and his bag across his lap and his mouth set, and the lads carried him as one carries a bishop. At the bottom of the steps he looked up at the little house, with the plank on the gate, and the shed, and the three red hens in a basket on the cart beside him with a cloth over their heads, and he said, to nobody, in a thin dry voice, “I’ve not left this house in forty-one years.”

“You’ll be back,” said Helen.

“Will I?”

“I don’t know.” She would not lie to him. “I think so. I’ll carry you myself if there’s a lift going.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” said the old man. But he reached out and patted the side of the basket, once, where the red hen’s head was, under the cloth. “I’ve had that one nine years.”

They went up the hill in a straggle in the rain, the cart in front with its basket and the old man’s chair roped on top like a throne, and the lads and the mule behind, and a small thin line of people from the river houses coming after, with their children and their bundles and their faces turned down. It took an hour and ten

minutes. She counted them as they went by: the woman from the bend with the baby on her chest and a bag in each hand, the two from the lean-to cottages, the family of five from the end house with a goat on a string, a girl of about nine pushing a barrow with a clock in it. She counted them again at the school door, and the number was right.

It was only when she had counted a third time that she saw it was not.

• • •

The goat man had not come.

She found him at ten, at the gate of the long stone house on the bank, with a bucket in his hand and a shotgun slung over his shoulder, which was not for anyone, she saw, but for the fox. He had on his oilskin and his boots. He had been up since three. He had got the milking done, and was standing in the middle of the yard in the rain, in the middle of thirty-one goats that were not going anywhere, with the look of a man who has been told that his house is on fire and has decided to finish his tea.

"I said no," he said.

"I know."

"I said I'd go if I was told what I'd see. I've been told." He did not look at her. "She stood up in a room and said it'd run brown at the toe, and it might be an hour or a day or never. I thought about that. I thought about it all night." He set down the bucket. "I'm not going. I've thirty-one goats and no one to take them. If it comes, it comes, and I'll be at the gate."

She had known this would be the worst of it. She had known it on Friday, with the list in her hand, and she had thought about what she would say, and had got nothing. She stood in the yard in the rain with her hood dripping and looked at his long dry patient face, and the goats pressing against the wall behind him, brown and white

and grey, with their yellow eyes, watching her with a flat amiable contempt.

"What would you need," said Helen, "to go?"

He looked at her.

"Not to leave them. To go with them." She spoke slowly, working it out as she said it. "There's a field behind the school. Martin's put the lads on the fence. It's a bad field, it's all thistle, but it's high, and there's a shed. It'd hold them. It'd not hold thirty-one for a winter, but it'd hold them for a week." She drew breath. "If you moved them. Today. If you slept in the shed with them, and milked them there. If somebody walked up with you."

"Over the hill?"

"Up the lane. It's three-quarters of a mile."

"With thirty-one."

"With me," said Helen, "and the Aldous boy, and a bit of rope, and a bucket of meal."

He looked at the goats. He looked at the house, and the bank, and the long grey gleam of the river at the bottom of the field, going quietly by. Then he did something she had not expected. He laughed, a short dry crack, like a stick.

"It's a very stupid plan," said the goat man.

"I know."

"They'll scatter."

"They will."

"There's a doe that's near her time." He rubbed his jaw. "I'd need a barrow for her." He picked up the bucket. "All right." He did not look at her. "All right. I'm not saying it's because I'm told. I'm saying it's a plan."

They took four hours. It was a thing she would tell for years and never tell properly: the whole long wet afternoon of it, thirty-one goats going up a lane in the rain in six directions at once, and the Aldous boy at the back with the bucket of meal, shouting, and a doe in a barrow looking round with an air of great offended dignity, and

the goat man in front with the rope, not speaking, with his hat down. A white nanny broke from the line at the chapel wall and went through a hedge. Two of Martin's lads went after her. The whole procession stopped in the lane in the downpour to watch, and a woman came to her door and stood with her arms folded, and began, helplessly, to laugh.

They had them all in the field by four. She counted them. It was thirty.

"There's one missing," said the goat man. He said it quietly, standing at the gate with the rope in his hand, in the dusk.

"I'll look."

"It's the little brown wether. He's a fool." He did not turn round. "He'll be at the house. He'll have gone back."

She walked down alone in the last of the light.

• • •

The river road was empty.

She had never seen it so. She walked down it in the dusk with the rain easing to a drizzle, past house after house with its shutters closed and its door locked and its yard swept, past the old man's gate with the plank leaning against it, past the bend where the woman's lamp had burned every night for six years, now dark. A cat sat on a wall. A shutter banged somewhere in the wind. It was the silence she noticed. It was a silence she had never heard in the whole of her life, a thick wet listening silence, as of a place that has been told to hold its breath.

The wether was in the goat man's yard, eating a cabbage. She caught him by the horn and led him out onto the road and tied the rope to the gatepost, and went on, because there was no one to hold him.

Her own house was the last but one.

She had not meant to go in. She had meant to go past, up the hill, to the school and the shop, to her daughter. She stopped at the gate

with her hand on the latch, in the grey dusk, and the long low house stood in front of her with the washing still on the line, a row of small damp shirts and one blue cardigan.

She went in.

It was quiet. It smelled of lye and woodsmoke and cold ash. The stove was out. The kettle stood on it with the lid off. On the table was a half-eaten crust, and a cup with a ring of milk dried in the bottom, and the slate with its chalked word still on it, in a small upright careful hand, that she had not been able to rub off for a week. She put her bag down on the floor and stood in the middle of the kitchen and looked at it.

She had thought that when the people were safe it would be done. She stood there in the empty house with her coat dripping on the flags and understood that it was not. It had barely begun. There were the sheets in the drum, which would mould. There was the laundry in the sacks, which belonged to other people, who would want it. There was the bed, and the stove, and the table, and the shelf of cups, and the twelve years of small ordinary things that a house accretes round a person and that could not be carried up a hill in the rain. There was the great steel machine in the next room, under its sheet, with its iron door and its belt, which she had given up six places on a truck for and could not move in a month.

She could not save it. She knew that. She had known it on Friday, with the pencil in her hand, and had said it aloud in the laundry that morning to a boy with large eyes, and had meant it. She had not known it would look like this. It would look like a cup.

She took the cup. She took the slate, and the blue cardigan from the line, wet, and the small flat tin of buttons that was not there because it was at Patrick's, and the shelf's one good bowl. She put them in the bag. She did not take anything else. She stood a moment longer in the doorway, looking back at the dark kitchen with its cold stove and its half-eaten crust, and the line of small shirts through

the window, and found that she was not crying, which surprised her.

Then she shut the door, and did not lock it, and went up the hill to her daughter.

20

What Ruth postponed

The old outlet works stood at the foot of the dam on the downstream side, in a hollow where the rain collected, and none of the three of them had been inside it for nine years.

They went down at seven on Tuesday, in oilskins, with a crowbar and two lamps and a coil of rope, by the steep path along the toe where the concrete met the hill. It was a bad path. The rain had been at it for eleven days, and it ran with brown water, and Ruth went down it sideways with her hand on the wall, her knees complaining at every step. Ben went first. Martin came behind with the crowbar over his shoulder, saying nothing, with his collar up and his cap pulled down, and the three of them went down into the hollow one after another like men going into a church they had been told was unsafe.

It was a squat grey hut with a corrugated roof and a door that had not been opened since the year the old chief died. Beyond it, cut into the hillside, ran the channel: a long open trench lined with stone, forty feet wide, curving away round the shoulder of the hill and down toward the river, built sixty years ago for exactly this and never used. Ben's lads had cleared it on Monday. It lay full of rain and dead leaves, with a clean-cut edge, and the water standing in it was black.

"It's sound," said Ben. He had walked its length the day before. "The lining's sound. There's a bit gone at the bend where a tree got in, and I've had it packed. It'll take it."

"Will it?" said Martin.

"It was built to."

"It was built sixty years ago by people who're dead."

"Yes," said Ben. "I'm only saying it was built to."

The door opened on the third try. Inside it was cold and dry and smelled of iron, and in the middle of the floor, under a skin of dust, stood the gate stem: a great round steel column the thickness of a man's thigh, rising from the floor through a hole in the roof, with a cast iron hand-wheel on top of it as wide as a cartwheel, spoked, and a sleeve of black grease where it went through the bearing. It lifted a gate at the foot of the dam. Open it and the lake drained out of the bottom, where the pressure was; shut it and the lake stayed. Ruth stood in the doorway with her lamp. She had not seen it since she was forty-seven.

She had turned it once. It had been in September, nine years ago, a dry blue day, and the old chief had had a bad hip. He had stood beside her with one hand on the wheel and said, in his dry wheezing voice, that it was a thing that wanted doing once a decade, like a tooth, to keep the water from setting. They had turned it a quarter of a turn. It had screamed. It had gone back the other way, and she had thought no more about it. He had died the following spring.

"That's it," said Ruth.

Martin looked at it. He walked all round it with the lamp held up, slowly, and put his hand on the stem and took it away, and looked at the black grease on his fingers. He had not said anything since the path. It was not until he had finished the circuit and come back to the door that he turned and said, in the same level voice, looking at neither of them, "Why was the drain door shut for two years?"

• • •

It came as a flat plain question, and it fell in the cold small room like a stone down a well.

She had known it was coming. She had known on Friday in the gallery, with the lamp in her hand, and again at the supper, and again in the dark. She had worked out what she would say. She had said it over to herself on the stair. It was a good answer, and nearly all of it was true, and she stood in the doorway of the hut with the rain on her back and began to say it.

"It was the pump."

"I know it was the pump."

"July, two summers ago. One hoist, one truck, a hill full of people with no water." She heard her voice go on, even and quick, laying one thing on another. "I chose the pump. I'd choose it again."

"No," said Martin. "I don't say it was."

"I thought I'd do the door in September."

"And did you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

She stopped. She had a sentence ready. She looked at it, in her head, as one looks at a coat on a peg. It said: there was the harvest, and the winter arrangements, and the cold store's compressor, and the long rain. It said: I was busy. It said: nothing was wrong. All of it was so.

"Because I put it off," said Ruth.

Nobody moved. The rain drummed on the corrugated roof, a long even hollow roar.

"I put it off in September. When the rain eases, I said. In October, when the followers are done. In November, it's only a door. A good reason every month, and I never said no." She breathed in. "I never said yes either. I said next month. A thing you're doing next month doesn't get looked at."

"Did you think it mattered?" said Martin.

"I thought it was probably fine."

"Probably."

"It's a drain, I thought, it's been dry for years. If I ask Martin for the hoist I'll owe him. The axle still on my conscience, the diesel never paid." She said it flat, as one reads a figure. "I didn't ask because I didn't want to owe you. That's the whole of it."

She stopped. She stood in the grey light of the doorway with her hands hanging and her face wet from the rain, and did not look at her son.

"I see," said Martin.

He said it quietly. He did not seem angry. He stood in the middle of the hut with the lamp held low, and the great black stem going up beside him into the dark, and looked at her for what seemed a long time with a face she could not read. Then he said, "I'd have lent it."

"I know."

"I'd have lent it in the first week. I'd have been rude about it." His mouth moved. "I'd have charged you in onions."

"I know you would."

"Well," said Martin. "There it is."

• • •

Ben had not spoken. He stood at the back of the hut, in the shadow of the stem, with his lamp hanging at his side and the light moving on his boots, and she had not been able to make herself look at him.

She did now. He was standing still, with his head a little on one side, with an expression she had not seen on him since he was fourteen, when he had been told a thing about the dam that he had been sure was not so. He was not looking at her with anger. It would have been easier if he had. He looked like somebody who had been handed a stone and told that it was an egg.

"I thought you'd decided," said Ben.

"What?"

"I thought it was a decision. That you'd looked at the door and the pump and the summer and said, this, not that, and been right." He said it slowly. "I was angry because I thought you'd chosen, and then not told me. I thought it was something you'd done with your eyes open."

"It was—"

"It wasn't." He did not say it harshly. "You didn't choose. You didn't do it. You didn't not do it. You just—left it where it was, and said next month." He shook his head. "I'd have known what to do with a decision. I'd have known what I thought. I don't know what to do with this."

"It was both," said Ruth.

"What?"

"The pump was a decision. The rest was putting off." She said it plainly. "I let the first cover the second." She looked at him. "It wasn't an accident, and I didn't hide it. I didn't look."

He was silent a long time.

"I think that's worse," said Ben, at last. "And I think it's better."

"Yes."

"I don't know which."

"No," said Ruth. "I don't either."

• • •

They settled it in the doorway of the hut, in the rain, in about ten minutes, and it was the quickest piece of business she had done in her life.

Martin set it out. He did not look at her while he did it. He said that she could have the chain hoist and the carriage, and the three-inch pump and its hose, for the week, and that she should sign for them in his book, in her own hand. He said that he would send Tessa and the two lads, and the lathe if it was wanted, and what stock was left. He said he would not be able to carry the lads' wages beyond the month and would say so to them. He said that she could not

promise when the hoist would come back and he would write that she had not promised. “It’s not me being hard,” he said, to the stem. “Put it in the book, so I can show I knew.”

“Write it.”

“I will.” He wiped the grease off his fingers on his trousers. “And you’ll tell me before you break anything.”

“I’ll tell you after.”

“Before.”

“Before,” said Ruth.

Ben was looking at the wheel. He had gone to it while they talked, and stood beside it with his hand on the black iron rim, and she saw his thumb move on the spoke, slowly, as a man tries a latch. When Martin had done he turned round.

“I’ll coordinate,” he said. “If you’ll let me.”

“Yes.”

“Not suggest. Coordinate. The crews, the relay, the sequence. Who goes where and when. I say stop, it stops.” He did not look at her. “Say it now. I don’t— not at the wheel. I can’t be finding it out at the wheel.”

She stood in the doorway with the rain running off her hood and the stem rising behind him into the dark, and felt a thing go out of her, quietly, like a breath she had held for nine years. It did not hurt. It was only strange.

“What do you want me to do?” said Ruth.

He took his hand from the wheel.

“This,” he said. “You turned it with the old man. I never did. I’d like you at the wheel. With a lad on the other side. You know how it feels when it’s going, and I only know how it reads.” He drew breath. “That’s all. That’s the job. I don’t want you anywhere else.”

“I can do that.”

“I know.” His mouth twitched. “I’d have been surprised if you’d said no.”

• • •

The engineer's voice came through the control-room set at six, as it had come every evening that week, thin and dry and far off, from a long way down the ridge.

It was not a good line. It came and went with the weather, through the repeater on the ridge, and they sat round the bench in the lamplight with the speaker hissing and the cold coming in under the door, Ruth and Ben and Martin and June, and listened to a man in a warm room three hours away say what he would do. He said it slowly, in short plain sentences, between bursts of static. He said open it in stages. He said a quarter, no more, to begin with. He said watch the toe, and the weir, and the channel, and do not go further without a reading. He said that he could advise and could not be there. He said that he would be at the set at the same hour tomorrow and every day after, and at night if they had a need, and that they were to say clearly what they saw.

"And if the line goes?" said Martin.

"Then you'll make the call," said the thin voice. "It'll be yours. I'll not be able to make it for you."

Nobody said anything. The static rose, and fell.

They had the hoist. They had the pump. They had the channel, and a wheel, and a man to read it, and two lads, and a week. She sat in the lamplight with her wet hands round a mug of Patrick's tea and thought that it was more than she had had on Monday, and that it was nearly enough. It was a usable thing. It would hold if everything was in its place.

There was one thing missing, and she knew it, and so did Martin.

It was the stem. She had seen it in the hut: the great column of steel with its sleeve of black grease, and at the bottom, where the nut sat, a thread worn to a shine by nine years of standing in its own damp. Nobody had said it. She could feel it in the air of the room, a thing everyone knew and no one had named, like a smell. The stem would not turn on that nut. Not now. Not under load. It wanted a

new one, in bronze, cut true, by a hand that knew how, and there was only one pair of hands in Alder Falls that could do it.

She looked out of the window. In the lit door of the workshop across the yard, in the rain, a girl in a pair of borrowed boots was sitting on an upturned crate sharpening a chisel on a stone, not looking at anyone. She had a clean white square of paper sticking out of her jacket. It had been there all week.

"I've not asked her," said Martin, quietly, at her shoulder.

"Ask her."

"I can't." He was looking at the same window. "I can't ask a girl to stay for no wages."

"You could tell her what you need."

"I know what I need," said Martin. "It's not the same."

The girl in the doorway ran her thumb along the edge of the chisel, and looked at it, and did it again.

21

The work before the gate

By Wednesday noon half the town was on the dam, and nobody had told them to be.

They came up the hill in twos and threes with spades and barrows and lengths of rope, and stood about on the crest in the rain until somebody gave them a job. Ben gave them jobs. He stood at the head of the outlet path in a borrowed oilskin with a ration sheet in his hand and sent them off one after another, in a quiet flat voice she had never heard from him, like a man dealing cards: you, the path; you and you, the channel; you, with the barrow, the fallen tree at the bend; you, the lamp posts. Kit's motor man took the line to the school roof. Pete took a gang to widen the track where the hoist would have to come. A woman she had known all her life as a laundress turned out to be able to splice a rope faster than anyone, and was put on the rigging.

They could not use the radio in the gorge. That was the first thing Ben had found, and he had found it on Monday, standing at the bend with a handset against his ear and the rain running down his neck. The hill cut it. The signal came and went in the cutting like a bird in a hedge, clear at the top, nothing at the bottom, a hiss and a pop in the middle, so that a man could say a sentence at one end of the channel and have it arrive at the other in pieces. It was not a mys-

tery. It was rock. They solved it as people did, with what they had: lamps, and flags, and a boy at every bend. There was a lamp on the crest and a lamp at the bridge and a lamp on the school roof, and Marit, with a ledger and a pencil, in a hut by the weir, writing down what each of them said.

"Three flashes," said Ben, in the hut, with the ledger in front of him. "All's well. Two, hold. One long, get out. Anyone who sees one long goes up, not down. Up the hill. I don't care what they're carrying." He looked round at the half-dozen faces in the lamplight, the lads and the old man from the boring bar and Kit with his hat in his hand. "Say it back."

They said it back. They said it three times, and he made them do it again.

• • •

The nut was Tessa's.

She had known since Tuesday night, in the doorway of the workshop, with the chisel in her hand. She had gone up to the hut that evening and put her palm against the black grease of the stem and her ear against the cold iron, and had stood so for a long time with her eyes shut, like a girl listening to a shell. It was what the Tender had shown her on the generator, the second night: a hand on the housing, an ear to the casing. You don't hear a thing going, they had said. You hear the note change. Then she had come back to the workshop and said to Martin, shortly, across the bench, that the nut was gone.

"Gone," said Martin.

"It's worn to a wire. I could see it with the lamp. It'll not take a load. It'll strip at the first turn and the whole stem'll run." She was not looking at him. "It's bronze. It wants to be bronze, and cut true, and it wants a lead of a half-inch and a square thread. I can cut it. I can cut it on the big lathe in a night." She swallowed. "I've no bronze."

He had looked at her, and at the rack where the district bar had been, an empty shelf with a rim of green dust.

She told Ruth afterward that it was the quietest she had ever seen him. He had stood in the shed with his hands in his pockets, in the lamplight, and then he had turned and walked down to the far end, past the big machine under its grey sheet, past the grindstone, past the bench with the vice, to a small old squat green thing in the corner that nobody had used for two years because it was too slow. It was his first lathe. He had bought it with his father's money at twenty-two. It had a long brass-nutted leadscrew down the front of its bed, bright with seventy years of oil.

"That's bronze," said Martin.

"That's your lathe."

"It's a nut." He put his hand on the screw, and took it away. "It's only the half-nut. It'd come out on four bolts." He did not turn round. "It does the little work. The fittings. The bushes. It's what I'd use to do the follower sleeves." He cleared his throat. "I'll not have it again. Not with that."

"I know."

"It's seventy years old."

"I know it is, Mr Dyer."

"Then take it," said Martin, and went out into the rain.

She took it. She did it on Wednesday, at three in the afternoon, with a spanner and a block of wood, kneeling on the cold floor under the squat green machine, with the lads standing round in their wet coats saying nothing. The four bolts came out. The half-nut came away from the screw in her hand, a heavy ring of dull yellow metal split along its middle and worn smooth as a stone, and she sat back on her heels and looked at it, and at the lathe, which stood now with a hole in it where the heart had been. It would not run again. It would stand there a long time.

"Go on," said somebody, gently.

She began cutting the new one that night.

• • •

The argument about the coat began at six, and it was, afterward, the thing Ruth remembered best.

She had been up since four. She had been at the wheel with the lad, going through the motions in the grey hut, in the dust and the cold, feeling for the play in the bearing, the place where the whole stem seemed to hang on a thread. She had walked the channel. She had read the weir. She had done the sum of the next two days in her head, and again, and had come out in the evening onto the apron in her old jacket, sodden to the shoulder and stiff with cold, and found her son standing in her way with something over his arm.

"Put this on," said Ben.

It was a coat. It was a long brown waxed one, with a hood and a belt and all its buttons, and it had been Marit's father's. It was dry. It was the first dry thing she had seen in a week.

"I've a jacket."

"You've a wet jacket."

"It's no wetter than—"

"Mum."

"I'll not be in it more than—"

"Put it on." He did not raise his voice. He stood in front of her on the apron in the rain with the coat held out in both arms, as a man holds a child, his face drawn and white and perfectly set. "You've been wet for twelve days. You've a cough you think I haven't heard. You're at the wheel tomorrow, and you'll be there six hours, and if you're shaking you'll feel it wrong." He drew breath. "I said I'd co-ordinate. I said, I say stop, it stops. It's not a thing I want to use on a coat. But I will."

She stood there. She had a great many things to say. They were all of them true. She was fifty-six, and had walked the dam for twenty-six years in all weathers, and he had been nine, once, with a dead bird in a handkerchief. She looked at the coat, with its brown folds and its black buttons, and her son's face above it, grey with

tiredness and the rain, and she heard Patrick's voice, somewhere in her head, say very clearly: *you're going to let him, aren't you.*

She took it.

It was heavy. It smelled of wax and dry wool and somebody else's house. She put it on, over the jacket, and did up the buttons, one after another, with fingers that did not work, and he stood and watched her do every one, and did not say anything at all. It was warm. It was so warm that she nearly cried. She stood on the apron in the rain in the dead man's coat, hunched, with her chin in the collar, and said, in a voice that was not quite what she meant, "It's a good coat."

"It's Marit's dad's."

"I know whose it is."

"He's not using it," said Ben, and turned and went back to the hut, quickly, with his shoulders up, and she saw him put the back of his wrist against his eyes.

• • •

Patrick brought the soup at eight, on a barrow, with Helen's child on top of it.

She had not been told she was coming. She sat on the lid of the soup can with her boots dangling and her hood down, in a coat that was Helen's, with an air of grave unembarrassed authority, and held on to the lid with both hands. "Grandad says I'm cargo," she said. "I'm not allowed to talk till we're at the top."

"You're talking," said Patrick.

"I'm at the top."

They ate on the apron, in the lee of the pump house, all together, out of tin mugs, with the bread torn off a long loaf and passed from hand to hand. It was the thickest soup he had ever made. There was barley in it and beans and a good deal of smoked ham-bone, and the steam came off it into the rain in a long white feather, and nobody spoke for ten minutes. Pete's gang sat in a row on the wall with their

boots in a puddle. Martin ate standing up. Tessa had fallen asleep with her mug in her lap, on the floor of the pump house porch, with her head against a sack of cement and the half-nut on her knees, wrapped in a rag.

It was Patrick who saw the lad.

He was one of the two from the station, the big slow boy with the red ears, and he was standing at the hoist carriage in the dusk with a chain in his hand, a heavy steel chain, and a lock pin, and he was setting the pin. She saw it at the same moment. She saw him push it through the link, slowly, tiredly, and slide the keeper across, and she was on her feet and across the apron before she had thought, with the soup slopping out of her mug onto the coat.

"Stop."

He stopped.

"Show me." She took the pin out of his hand. She held it up to the lamp. "It's the wrong way. It's through the wrong link. It'd have held till it had a load, and then it would have walked." She said it flatly. She was not angry. She was too tired. "You've been on since six."

"I had a sleep at dinner."

"You had your eyes shut at dinner." She put the pin in her pocket. "Go home. Go to your bed. Go now."

"I'm all right—"

"I know you are. You'd have been all right for the first ten minutes." She looked at him. He was nineteen, with a long soft sleepy tired face, and he had been sixteen hours on his feet in the rain doing what he had been asked. "Go and sleep. I'll put someone on. It's not a punishment."

"It's only I didn't—"

"I know you didn't." She heard her own voice go gentle, and was surprised by it. "That's why it's a mistake and not a thing you did. Go on."

He went. He went across the apron in the lamplight, slowly, with his hands hanging, as a man goes who has been told he is no use and

is too tired to mind. Halfway to the lane he stopped, and turned, and said in a strained voice, “Will you not be cross with Ben?”

“I’ll not be cross with anyone,” said Ruth.

She put another lad on the chain. She checked the pin herself. It was the right link, and it held.

• • •

The forecast came at six the next evening, and it was bad.

They crowded into the control room, all of them that could, and stood about in their wet coats with the stove ticking and the speaker on the bench hissing at them, and the engineer’s thin dry voice came through the static from three hours down the ridge. It was a clear voice. It was not unkind. He said that the front they had been watching had firmed. He said it was a long one, and wet, and coming from the west, and would be on them by Saturday morning. He said that the lake was near its winter level, and the ground was full, and that anything that fell on it from Saturday would be coming straight in.

There was a pause. Static rose and fell.

“I’d like it open by Friday dusk,” said the voice. “A quarter, no more, and a reading at every hour. If you’ve not got it open by then I’d wait. I’d not try it in the dark in that.” A pause. “I’d not like to say what I’d do after.”

“After,” said Martin.

“After Saturday,” said the engineer, “I’d be guessing.”

Nobody spoke. The stove ticked. Through the window the last light was going out of the sky over the hill, in a slow grey wash, and the rain went on falling into the lamp-lit yard in a long fine silver thread. They had tomorrow. They had the daylight, and the hoist, and a lad on the chain, and a wheel. They had a nut that was not yet cut.

It was ten past midnight when Tessa came.

She came into the control room in her stocking feet with her boots in her hand, a small grey figure in a blanket, with her hair in her eyes and a streak of oil from ear to chin. She had not slept. Nobody had told her to. She put something on the bench in front of Ruth without a word, a bundle in a rag, and stood there with her arms hanging.

Ruth unwrapped it.

It was a ring of yellow metal as big as a fist. It was still warm. It shone in the lamplight, a clean bright dull gold, and she turned it in her fingers and ran her thumb round the inside, along the thread, which was square and fine and perfectly cut, with a lead like a whisper. There was not a burr on it. It might have come from a shop.

"I did it twice," said Tessa. "The first one was out. I could feel it. It was a hair off the pitch." She was swaying a little where she stood. "It's good. It's as good as I can. If it's not, I'll not know till it's under load."

"It's good."

"You can't tell by looking."

"I can tell by looking at you," said Ruth. "Go and lie down."

"I want to see it go in."

"You'll see it in the morning."

She did not move. She stood in the lamplight with her great borrowed boots in her hand and the oil on her face, looking at the ring of bronze on the bench, and Ruth saw, for the first time, the white corner of the letter, still tucked into her blanket, soft and grey with a week's rain. She did not look at it. She did not say anything. She held out the nut, in her palm, to Tessa, who took it, and looked at it a long moment, and put it carefully in her pocket.

"I'll sleep in the shed," said Tessa. "With it."

"Do."

"Is it Friday?"

"It's Friday," said Ruth, and she saw the girl's eyes go, very briefly, to the black window, and the long grey rain, and come back.

22

Where the warning ends

Ben had a list of eleven houses, and on Friday morning he went to every one of them and found it empty, and was not satisfied.

He went alone, at first light, with the list in his pocket and a handset on his belt that gave out beyond the second bridge. He went down the river road in a thin drizzle with the water brown and loud in its bed beside him, past the old man's gate with its plank, past the woman's dark house at the bend, past the empty yard where a wether stood tethered to a gatepost looking aggrieved, and put his hand flat on each door and knocked, and waited, and went on. He did it as he had done the followers in October, one at a time, in order, because it was the only way he knew. He had said that he would verify. He had said it in front of June. He had not said what he would do if it turned out to be so.

Helen's was the last but one. He opened the door and stood in the empty kitchen with the smell of lye in it and the slate on the table. It was in order. It was tidy, and cold, and quiet as a held breath. He stood for some time, looking at the shelf where the cups had been, and thought that he had never in his life been in this room without her in it, and that she had been right.

Then he went out and walked on, because the list had one more name on it, and it was not a name at all. It said *two cottages past the*

bend, in June's small clear hand. He had looked at it for three days and not seen it.

• • •

There were three.

He saw them from the bend, across the water. The river took a long loop there, a brown muscular curve between steep banks, and on the far side of it, on a bit of flat ground under the hill, stood the little group of stone cottages that nobody ever thought about because nobody ever went there. They were on the wrong side. The road did not cross. A footbridge did, a narrow plank thing on iron trestles that had been built sixty years ago for the dam's linesmen, and was still, in the same year, the only way over. He had crossed it perhaps twice in his life.

Two of the cottages were dark. In the third there was smoke.

He stood and looked at it for a long moment, with the rain on the back of his neck and the river loud below him, and he felt it, slowly, as a man feels cold water reach his knees: it was not on the list. It was on the map. It had not been on the list because nobody had counted it. Helen had gone down the road. He had gone down the road. Every one of them had stood at the bend, looking along the river road, and seen the road go on, and not looked across.

He went over the bridge at a run.

The plank boomed under his boots. The water was very high. It was a foot below the trestles, and rising, with a rolling thick sound like a great beast breathing, and the whole structure shook. He came off the far end onto a path of mud and went up to the third door and hit it with his fist.

"Hello! Hello—it's Ben Sayer, from the station—"

The door opened a hand's breadth. A woman of sixty or so looked out at him, thin and grey and fierce, in a man's jersey with the sleeves rolled, with a face like a shut gate.

"I know who you are," she said. "You're Patrick's boy. What do you want?"

"Did anyone come?"

"Come?"

"About the dam. About moving." He heard himself say it, stupidly, on a doorstep, with the rain running into his collar. "Did anyone tell you? Did anyone come across and say?"

"I heard it was a precaution." She looked at him. "I heard we'd to watch for a flash, and if it was one long we'd to go up the hill. The Aldous boy told me over the bridge on Tuesday. He shouted it." She did not blink. "We've been watching."

"And if you saw one long?"

"We'd go up."

"Up where?"

She pointed. It was a plain gesture. She pointed past his shoulder, behind him, across the water, to the high green slope of the hill on the near side with the school on top of it, small and square in the mist. "Up there," she said. "Over the bridge."

"And if the bridge—"

"What about the bridge?"

He could not say it. He stood on the step and looked at her, and at the water behind him, the brown heaving flood a foot below the planks, and he saw it, clear and entire, as one sees a drawing: the long one on the lamp, and a woman in a man's jersey running for the bridge, and a thing coming down the river that would take it. It would take it first. It was the lowest thing on the whole of the water. It would go before anything else did, long before anyone on the hill had seen the lamp, and she would be on the wrong side with nothing between her and the sea.

"You've not got a hill on this side," said Ben.

"We've the bank."

"It's forty feet. It's a bank, it's not a—" He stopped. "Is there anyone else?"

"There's my husband."

• • •

He was in the back room, in a bed that was a door laid on trestles, with a quilt, and he had not been out of it for four years.

He was a long yellow wasted man with a beard, propped on three pillows, and he looked at Ben out of the lamplit dark with enormous mild eyes. There was a smell of camphor and old blankets and a kind of clean sour sweetness. A kettle sat on a spirit stove at his elbow. On the sill a row of small pots with something green in them. He had a book open on the quilt. He did not seem surprised.

"That's Patrick's lad," he said, to the room. "He's come about the dam."

"I have."

"I'd thought somebody might." The voice was a thin dry rustle. "She's not told me. She doesn't tell me the bad news. I hear it through the wall, I've very good ears." He smiled. "Do I go?"

Ben stood in the doorway with his cap in his hand.

It was a question he had been asked by no one else. It was the right one. He looked at the bed, the door on its trestles, the long thin body under the quilt, and understood what it would take. It would take four men and a plank. It would take the whole of the morning, in the wet, over a footbridge a yard wide that was a foot above a flood, with a man on it who could not walk and a woman who would not leave him. It would take the rest of the daylight. It would take the lads from the outlet, the six best.

And Friday dusk was the window.

"Yes," said Ben. "You go."

• • •

He used the handset at the bridgehead, and it gave out in the middle of the first word.

It was the cutting. It was the rock. He stood on the iron trestle with the thing against his ear and the river roaring beneath him, and got a hiss, and a pop, and a single faint bubbled syllable that might have been Martin, and nothing. He tried again from the middle of the bridge. He tried from the end of it. He stood at the foot of the near bank with the handset held up over his head like a man trying to catch a bird, and Helen's voice said, small, from a great distance, "—say again—"

"I need six lads," said Ben, to the sky. "I need a door. Four to carry, two on the rope. At the bridge. Now."

"—no—"

"A door," he said. "Tell Martin. Tell him I need a door and I need it now and I'll not open."

It went. He stood with the dead handset in his fist and a wild unreasoning wish that he had a lamp. Then he put it on his belt and ran, up the hill to the school roof, where the flags were, in the rain, in the failing light of the morning, with his heart going in his throat, and found Helen standing at the top of the steps with her hands on her hips.

"I heard you," she said. "I got the door."

"How?"

"It's the one off the shop. Dad took it off the hinges." She said it very evenly. She had a rope over her shoulder. "He said you'd not have asked for a door if you didn't need it. He's sent four lads. Pete's bringing two more. They're at the foot of the steps." Her mouth moved. "You found someone."

"Past the bend. On the far side. They weren't on the list."

"No," said Helen. "They weren't." She did not look at him. "I should have seen it."

"So should I."

"It was on the map."

"I know." He drew breath. "It's why I'm going back."

• • •

The lads at the outlet were angry. He could feel it on the dam as he went along the crest at ten, in the thin dry drizzle, with the sound of the river a long way below him: a hard tight stiffness in the air, as on a street where a quarrel has just been stopped. They had been at the hut since six. They had the carriage in place, and the chain on the hoist, and the nut in its seat, fitted by Tessa at dawn with a rawhide mallet and a cold chisel and a great deal of language, and the wheel was ready. It was a clear morning. The rain had thinned, and a pale light lay over the channel. Pete stood on the lip of the hut with his arms folded, and Kit's motor man beside him, and a row of the others on the wall, all looking at the sky.

"It's ten," said Pete.

"I know."

"It's a dry hour. It'll not last. It's going to come on at noon, he said, and it'll not be a fit day by two." He did not say it unkindly. "I'd have thought it was a thing you'd want to do in the light."

"I do."

"Then why are you taking six of my lads off it?"

He stood in front of them in the thin rain, and felt it come up in him, a hot tight pressure under the breastbone. He was twenty-nine. He had been awake since four. He had a list in his pocket and a woman in a man's jersey at the back of his mind who had stood in a doorway and said *we've been watching*, and he could not say any of it. It came out stiff and wrong. "Because there's a man on the far side of the bridge who can't walk," said Ben. "And I've not opened a sluice into a river with him in it."

"It's a bed."

"It's a man in a bed."

"There's thirty-four on the river road that went up on Monday," said Pete. "One more on a door's not—"

"It's not one more!" He had not meant to shout. It rang off the side of the hut, and the lads along the wall stopped talking. "It's the

one we didn't count! Do you want to be the one who counts him?" His voice cracked on it and he could not stop. "Go home, then, the lot of you, if it's too much, and I'll carry the door myself—"

Nobody moved. Ben stood with his hands open, breathing. "Sorry," he said. "That's— sorry. I'm not opening it till he's over. I know what the light is. I'll stand here till the lamp goes three, and then I'll say go."

Nobody said anything. Pete looked at him for a long time with his thin brown amused unamused face. Then he unfolded his arms.

"Right," he said. "I'll tell the lads."

• • •

The lamp went three at ten past one.

He was at the hut door when it came. He had been standing there for three hours with his hands in his pockets, watching the roof of the school, a tiny square of dull grey against the hill. It had been a long time. Nobody had spoken much. Martin had come down at noon and stood beside him for ten minutes without a word, with his cap over his eyes, and gone away again. Ruth had sat on an upturned bucket by the door with Marit's father's coat round her, and her eyes shut, and her hands in her sleeves.

The light on the school roof flickered once. It paused. It flickered twice. It paused. It flickered three times, small and bright and steady, like a pulse, and went out.

"That's him," said Ben. His voice shook. "That's the door. That's all of them. He's over."

"Go," said Ruth, not opening her eyes.

"Go," said Ben, and turned into the hut.

• • •

The stem would not turn.

He knew it before anybody said it. He heard it in the hut door, from the sound the lads were making, a low flat rasping scream like

a nail drawn down a slate, and came in and found them standing in a ring round the great black column with their hands on the spokes of the wheel and their faces strained, four to the rim, and the wheel not moving. Tessa was kneeling at the foot of the stem with a lamp, white as paper.

"It's not the nut," she said. She did not look up. "The nut's fine. It's sweet. I've had it half a turn and it ran like silk." She put her hand on the black iron, above the sleeve. "It's this. The top bearing. The guide, where it goes through the roof. It's set. It's got nine years of grease in it gone hard as wax and it's not letting go."

"Can you free it?"

"I can try. With heat. It'll take two hours." She raised her face. It was streaked with grease, and drawn, and very young. "And if I free it, it'll not turn on its own. It'll want two on the wheel, and a lad on the chain, and a hoist on the stem to take the weight off the guide, and it'll go slow. A quarter turn at a time. By hand. It's not what I'd said. It's not what we'd planned."

"How far?"

"A quarter of the way open. Perhaps less." She looked at the lamp. "Perhaps that, by dark."

He stood in the doorway of the hut. Behind him the light had begun to change. He felt it on his back, a slow thickening, a long grey hand drawn over the hill, and he knew without turning that the rain had come back. It had begun to fall on the corrugated roof again, in a long soft drumming. It was one o'clock. It would be dark at five.

"Do it," said Ben. "Free the bearing. Use what you need."

"And then?"

"And then we open it as far as it'll go." He heard his own voice, level, thin, and a long way off. "It's all we've got. It's a quarter, by hand. It's what he said." He looked at the great black stem going up into the dark of the roof. "It'll have to do."

23

Stop there

At a quarter to four the bearing let go with a noise like a tree splitting, and the wheel turned.

It turned an inch. Ruth felt it through her palms before she saw it, a tiny shudder in the iron, as if something very large and very old had shifted in its sleep. She stood at the rim in Marit's father's coat with her hands on the spoke and her whole weight leaned into it, and the lad on the other side, the second big one from the boring bar, leaned too, grunting, with his boots braced and his breath going up in a white feather. She did not look at him. She looked at the stem. It was moving. It stood in the middle of the hut like a black tree in a forest of lamps, and a faint bright line had begun to show in the grease at the foot where the collar slid on it, a half-inch, an inch, a hair's breadth of clean steel sliding up out of the dark.

"It's going," said somebody.

"Don't say it's going," said Tessa. "Say what it's doing."

"It's going up."

"How much?"

"Half an inch."

"Say it when it's an inch," said Tessa, and bent again over the nut.

It was the noise she would remember. It was a roar. It was the rain on the corrugated roof, which had come back at two like an

army and now drummed on the iron overhead in one unbroken hollow crash, so that nobody could hear anybody, and they had given up speaking and went to signs. It was the scream of the stem in the freed guide, high and thin and rasping. It was the chain on the hoist, ringing at every lurch, and the shout of the lad at the block, and the wet drip of the lamps. The hut was full of steam. It was warm for the first time in a week, with six bodies in it and the heat of the bearing, and the air stank of hot grease and wet wool and iron, and she was sweating under the coat. It was nearly dark. The grey square of the door at the end showed the day going out in a slow wash.

They had been at it an hour. It was the sixth quarter-turn of the wheel, or the seventh. She had lost count. Her shoulders had gone from pain to a kind of dull thick numbness, and her hands, on the cold iron spoke, were not hers. It was a very odd feeling. She had been cold for so long that it had stopped being a thing that happened to her and become a thing she was.

She turned the wheel. It went another quarter, with a scream, and stopped.

"Hold," said Ben.

• • •

It was Tessa who saw it.

She had not left the nut in an hour. She had lain on her stomach on the grating at the foot of the stem, with a lamp in her left hand and a small flat mirror in her right that she had borrowed from Marit, looking up at the underside of the bronze where it sat in its seat, with her cheek on the wet iron and her hair in her eyes. She had said nothing. She had not spoken at all. She lay in the bright wet roar like a girl at the bottom of a well, still, watching the thread go round.

The note had changed first. It had dropped a half-tone on the last turn, as the Tender had said it would, before there was anything to see. She saw the line. It was a thin bright burnished streak on one

flank of the nut, silver on the yellow, no thicker than a hair. It ran up one side of the thread and not the other. It was getting brighter. She looked at it for a moment longer, and her mouth went white. Then she put her mirror down on the grating, carefully, as one puts down a thing that is going to be needed, and got up on her knees.

"Stop."

Nobody heard her. The roof thundered. The lad on the wheel leaned.

"Stop," said Tessa, louder. "Stop it. Stop."

"It's only a quarter more," said the lad.

"I mean stop *now*."

She was on her feet. She did not shout. It was a hard hoarse high thin voice, and it went through the roar of the hut like a wire, and the lad's hands came off the spoke. Ruth had already stopped. She had heard it a half-second before anyone. It was a sound she knew, though she could not have said from where: the sound a person makes who has seen what the rest of the room has not, and is not going to be talked out of it. She took her hands off the wheel and stood with them in the air.

"What?" said Ben, from the door.

"It's loading it on one side." Tessa was standing over the nut with her fists clenched at her sides. She was shaking. "It's the chain. It's the hoist. We've it hung off the centre but the pull's gone to the left, it's dragging the stem sideways in the guide. It's cocked. It's not much. It's a hair. But the nut's taking all the thrust on the one flank. Look." She bent and pointed with the lamp. "There. That line. That's bronze going bright. It's going to strip. It'll strip on the next turn or the one after, and when it goes it'll go all at once. The stem'll run. It'll run down on the gate, and the gate'll go where it likes." She looked up. Her eyes were enormous. "I don't know what happens then. I don't know what it does. I know I don't want to find out in the dark."

"You're sure?" said Ben.

"I'm not sure," said Tessa. "I'm not sure of anything. I've a line on a nut." She swallowed. "I'm sure I'm not going to let you turn it."

It was quiet, very suddenly. The lads had stopped. The roof went on drumming, but under the roof the hut had gone still, and the lamps hung, and the great black stem stood in the middle of them with its collar of clean bright steel two inches above the grease.

She felt the pull of it. It was a strong one, and it was in her own body, and she would think about it for a long time afterward. They were nearly there. They had been at it five hours. The bearing was free, and the nut was in, and the stem was turning, and the light was going, and the front was coming, and every lad in the hut was cold and wet and tired to the bone and wanted it done. A quarter. One quarter more. It was what the engineer had said. A hand's breadth more would have given them the flow they wanted, and they were so close, and the girl on her knees by the nut was twenty-two and had a streak on a piece of metal.

"Keep going," said Ruth's body, in her ear, in a clear cold voice. "It's only a hair. It's held for six turns."

She did not say it.

"Mr Dyer," said Ben.

Martin had been standing at the back by the wall, with his arms folded and his cap pulled low and his face in shadow. He had not moved all afternoon. He came forward now, slowly, into the circle of the lamps, and went down on one knee beside the girl, and put his lamp beside hers, and looked at the nut.

He looked for a long time. He did not touch it. He put his head on one side, and ran his eye along the bright line from one end to the other, and then up the stem, and along the chain, and over the hoist hook with its off-centre pull. Ruth watched his face. She saw the whole of it happen. It was the face of a man who had turned half the metal in the town with his own hands, and had spent thirty years being right about it, and wanted, for the first time in his life, very badly to be wrong.

"She's right," said Martin.

He said it flat. He did not look at anyone. He stood up, and wiped his hand on his knee, and said again, more quietly, "She's right. That's a side load. I'd not turn it."

"Not for a hair?" said Pete, from the wall.

"Not for a hair. A hair's how it goes." He turned. "I'm sorry, lads. It's a good nut. It's the best she's cut. It's the hoist." He looked at the girl on the grating. "I should have seen it."

"So should I," said Tessa. "I rigged it."

"So you did," said Martin. "And you saw it."

• • •

Ben came in from the door.

He walked across the hut slowly, with the lamp in his hand, and stopped by the wheel and looked at it. He did not look at Tessa, or at Martin. He looked at his mother. His face was grey and wet and set in the lamplight, and there was a pulse going in his jaw, and Ruth understood what he was going to do before he opened his mouth. It was the thing she would have done. It was the thing she had always done, in this room, with her hand on that wheel: look to the oldest face for the answer.

"Mum," said Ben.

"Yes."

"Tell me what you can judge."

It was not what she had expected. She had thought he would ask what she thought. He had asked a different question. It was a thing the engineer would have asked, in a clear dry voice, over the speaker, in the careful light of an office. She stood with her hands hanging at her sides in the roar and the steam, with the lamp-shadows swinging on the walls, and found that she knew exactly what she could judge. It was a small thing. She had not known it was so small.

"I can tell you the wheel's gone hard on the left," she said. "It has, for the last two turns. I felt it and thought it was the grease. I can

tell you that if it were my own nut I'd not turn it." She drew breath. "I can't tell you whether it'd hold. I can't tell you what it'd do if it let go. I've never seen one go. I've been told, by a man who'd seen two. I can't say it'd be a bad thing, or a small one. I don't know."

"Would you stop?"

"I'd stop."

"Would you re-rig?"

"I'd re-rig. I'd put a spreader on it. I'd take the pull off the stem."

"How long?"

"An hour," said Tessa. "With the second chain and a bar across. In the light, an hour. In the dark—" She stopped.

Nobody finished it.

It was twenty past four. The door of the hut showed a square of dull grey gone nearly to black. She could feel the rain, a long drumming, steady and heavy, and under it, now, a new sound, a low long moan from the hill, that was wind. She knew what it was. It was the front. It had come early.

Ben stood still. She watched him. He stood there, with the lamp in his hand, in his borrowed oilskin, twenty-nine years old, and she saw him do it: the whole slow weighing, a thing she had done herself a thousand times and had never once watched. He looked at the stem. He looked at the nut. He looked at the girl, and at Martin, and at the lads in their ring with their faces gone slack with exhaustion, and at the door, where the dark was. He looked at the ration sheet in his hand, with its column of numbers, the weir and the east gauge, and the hour at which the engineer had said, *I'd not try it in the dark.* She saw his lips move. She saw him count.

"An hour to re-rig," said Ben. "Dark by five. The front's here, raining sideways by six." His voice was very flat. "If we stop we lose the light and the evening. We open in the dark in a gale or we wait for morning, and in the morning the ground's wetter, the lake's higher and the channel's fuller."

"Yes," said Martin.

"If we go on we might open a quarter in twenty minutes."

"We might."

"Or we might strip the nut." He turned his head, very slowly, toward his mother. "And you don't know."

"No."

"Right." He drew a breath. He seemed to look inside himself for a moment, as a man goes through his pockets, and she saw whatever he found there settle in his face. It was not triumph. It was not even decision. It was a kind of grave, tired, ordinary steadiness, and she knew it, because she had seen it in the mirror. "We stop. We re-rig. Mr Dyer, you and Tessa, the spreader, the second chain. Take what lads you need. Done before six." He turned to the door. "We don't open a quarter tonight. A hand's width on a clean pull, and we watch it all night. The rest at first light, if it holds."

"A hand," said Pete.

"It's a start," said Ben. "It's a hand more than we've got." He looked round at them all, once, in the lamp-light, and his face broke a very little, at the corner of the mouth. "I'm sorry. I know you're tired. I know it's dark. I— it's the best I've got."

Nobody said anything.

Then the lad at the wheel, the big one from the boring bar who had not spoken in three hours, took his hands off the spoke, and wiped them down his trousers, and said, very hoarsely, "That's all right, Ben."

It was the first time in her life that she had heard anyone call him that in a voice that meant the other thing. It meant: you are the one. She stood in the roaring hut with her hands hanging and the cold coming back through her wet coat, and watched her son take the lamp from the nail and go out into the rain to find rope, and she thought that it was a very odd thing to be glad about, and that she was.

• • •

The light went at ten to five, in the middle of the rigging, with a sound like a sigh.

They worked on by lamps. They worked in a wet black roaring dark with the wind in the hut door, and the hoist chain swinging, and a bar of iron across the stem with a second chain looped round it and a ring-bolt shackled through, and the lamps held up in a ring by the lads' cold shaking hands, throwing huge wild shadows up the walls. Martin was on the ladder. Tessa was at the foot of the stem, flat on her face again. Nobody spoke. Somewhere beyond the hut the wind had risen to a long continuous howl, and the rain came in through the door in a thin cold slant, and it smelled, suddenly, of the sea.

She stood by the wheel and watched them do it. It was not her job. She had been told so. She had been told in a perfectly kind voice, by her son, that she should go and sit down; and she had gone and sat on the upturned bucket in the corner with the coat round her and her chin on her knees, for the first time in a week, and watched. She watched a girl of twenty-two direct a man of forty-seven on a ladder. She watched the second chain go up. She watched Ben at the door with his sheet. She found that she did not mind. She found that she minded, a little, far down, like a bruise one touches in sleep, and that it was bearable.

It was ten to six when Tessa said, "Right."

She said it quietly, from the floor, with her head on her arm. She got up, slowly, and wiped her hands on her trousers, and looked at the nut with her lamp. The bright line was gone. It was a plain dull yellow ring on a plain black stem, with a clean even gleam on both flanks of the thread, and she put her palm flat against it and kept it there for some seconds, as one puts a hand on a horse.

"It's sitting true," she said.

"Good," said Ben.

"It's a hand's width, no more. I'd not promise a half-inch."

"A hand."

"Not tonight." She turned her face. It was green-white and streaked and very tired, and the lamp threw a long shadow behind her. "It's not what we'd planned. It's not what I wanted."

"No," said Ben. "It's what we've got."

24

The first release

They opened it at ten past seven, in the dark, in a gale, a quarter of a turn at a time, and it was not at all what she had expected.

She had thought that there would be a moment. She had thought it for a fortnight, on the stair, in bed, in the grey light of the control room with the log open on her knee: a clean plain moment when the wheel turned and the thing she had been afraid of began to happen, so that she could look at it. There was no moment. There was a wheel, and a lad opposite with his boots braced, and the screaming of the stem in the guide, and Ben's flat voice from the door. "Quarter. Hold. Quarter. Hold." She turned. She leaned her whole weight on the spoke and felt it come, a quarter, with a long iron groan, and stop, and she stood with her hands on the cold rim and her breath going, and waited for the next.

It was the fifth quarter when she heard it.

She felt it first in the floor. It was a long low trembling, far under her boots, as if the whole hillside had drawn a breath. Then it came up through the wheel, a deep slow vibration in the iron that she felt in her teeth. Then the sound reached the hut. It was not loud. It was so deep that she did not at first hear it as a sound, but as a thing the air was doing: a long soft rolling roar, a long way off and a long way down, like a train under the ground. It grew. It went on growing for

what seemed a long time, and the lamps in their ring began to shiver on their nails.

"That's it," said Tessa, from the floor, in a thin high voice. "That's the water. It's in the pipe."

"Hold," said Ben. "Hold the wheel."

She held. She stood at the rim of the great black wheel in the lamplit hut with her palms flat on the iron and the roar coming up through it, and she thought, with perfect clarity and no feeling at all: it is going. It is going out of the lake. It is going through a hole in the bottom of a dam, down a pipe that nobody has looked at for nine years, into a channel built sixty years ago by people who are dead. She felt it in her hands. It was the strangest thing she had ever felt. It was like holding the wrist of someone whose pulse she could not count.

"A hand's width," said Tessa. She was on her knees at the foot of the stem with her lamp up, looking at the collar. "That's it. That's all it'll give. It's a hand. I'd not go a hair further."

"Then we'll stop there," said Ben. "Lock it."

They locked it. The lad with the chain dropped the pin, and the keeper, and Martin came forward and checked both with his thumb, and they stood back from the wheel, all of them, in a ring, with their hands hanging, and listened to the water.

• • •

It was the lamps that told them.

They had set them all that morning, in the sleet, on poles and roofs and gate posts down the length of the channel: one at the head of it, by the hut. One at the bend, where the tree had been. One at the bridge, on the iron trestle over the river. One on the school roof, and one on the crest of the hill above the town. Each had a lad, and a flag, and Marit's ledger had a column for each. Three flashes, all's well. Two, hold. One long, get out. They had said it back to Ben until the lads could say it in their sleep.

The lamp at the head of the channel went first. It flickered three times, small and bright, through the rain: the lad at the sluice, a hundred yards off in the dark, with his hand on the shutter. All's well.

"Water's in the channel," said Ben. He was standing at the door with his face to the dark. "It's taking it. It's a foot up. It's steady." He did not turn round. "Bend."

The second lamp flickered, three, small and clear. All's well.

"Bridge."

A long pause.

They stood waiting in the hut with the roar coming up through the floor and the wind howling in the door and the lamps shivering on their nails, and the third lamp did not show. It was a long minute. It was two. It was a space of dark at the end of the channel where the bridge should have been, and rain, and nothing else, and Ruth saw Ben's shoulders go up slightly in the doorway, as one braces for a blow.

"Bridge," said Ben, louder. He lifted the handset from his belt, and held it to his ear, and listened. It gave out a long dry hiss and a pop. He tried it again. He tried it from the step, and from the lip of the hut with his arm out in the rain, and it hissed and popped and said nothing. He said, "Bridge, hold, do you read, hold," and the thing went silent in his hand.

"It's the rock," said Pete.

"I know."

"It'll come."

"I know it will." He did not turn. "It's the only one I can't see."

She stood by the wheel. She could feel it at the back of her skull, hot and plain and very tempting, the old reflex of nine years, as a hand reaches for a rail: *open it more.* If the bridge could not be seen then no one knew. If no one knew, there was no point in waiting. They had a quarter, and a hand's width, and the water was in the channel; and the lake was big, and the rain was coming; and every

hour that the wheel stood at a hand's width was an hour in which the thing she was afraid of had its full weight to bear. It would be so easy. It would take two turns. It would take half a minute. She had her hands on the spoke.

"Hold," said Ben.

He had not looked round. He had not moved from the door. He said it into the dark, in a flat quiet level voice, with his face to the rain, and she took her hands off the wheel.

It was the hardest thing she had done in a year, and it took no effort at all.

• • •

The minutes went by like stones.

It was Ben who broke the quiet, and he did it, she thought, without knowing. He said, to nobody, in a low voice, "There's a woman's husband on a door."

"They're over," said Ruth.

"I know. I know they are." He drew breath. "I only mean it's what you think of. You think: I'll open it, and the thing will do what I think. And it does. And you've not looked at the one house you didn't count."

"Ben."

"I'm not— it's not a thing I'm saying to you." He did not turn round. "I'm saying it to the dark."

Something thudded on the hut door. It was a small flat wet sound, as of a fist on a board. Everybody turned.

The Aldous boy was standing in the doorway with the rain pouring off him.

He had run. She could see it. He was bent nearly double, with his hands on his knees and his cap gone and his hair plastered to his skull, and his chest going like a bellows, and his boots were coated to the knee in red mud. He opened his mouth and nothing came. He tried again.

"Bridge," said the boy.

"Say it."

"Bridge. It's—" He gulped. "Lamp's dead. The glass broke. It's the wind. Dad's there, he said run." He straightened. His face was white and streaming and fierce with importance. "He says it's all right. He says it's three. He says it's up a foot at the trestle and it's clear. He says it's not brown. He's looked. He says it's clear as a bell and it's going where it's meant to." He drew a long shuddering breath. "He says tell Ben he said so."

Nobody moved.

"Three," said Ben.

"Three."

"Clear."

"Not brown." The boy swallowed. "He had a torch. He held it right over."

Ben turned round.

He did it slowly. He stood in the door of the hut with his back to the wind and the lamp in his hand and the rain streaming down the oilskin, and looked across the room, past the stem and the wheel and the ring of lads, at nothing, with his mouth a little open. His face had changed. It had gone loose. The tight grey pinched look had gone out of it all at once, as if somebody had cut a string, and what was left was very young, and very tired, and so plainly and stupidly relieved that she could not look at it.

"Right," said Ben.

He said it again, softer. "Right."

"Is that it?" said Pete.

"That's it." He wiped his face with the heel of his hand, and left a smear of mud across his cheek. "That's the first stage. It's a hand's width. It's stable. It's clear at the toe and clear at the bridge and the channel's taking it." He drew breath. "We don't touch it. We watch it. We write down every hour. We do not go further till first light and a

reading, and then only if the engineer says." He looked round. "Does anybody not understand that?"

Nobody said anything.

"Then I'll have reliefs. Marit, give me the sheet."

• • •

It was done by ten. It was not done at all.

They had a rota by half past, in Marit's hand, on the back of a ration sheet: four hours on, four off, two at the hut, one at the bend, one at the bridge, a runner at each, a woman at the weir. There was a name against every hour. Ben made them say it back. There was tea, brought by Patrick on the barrow in a great copper can with a cloth over it, hot and sweet and too strong, and they drank it standing in the hut door in the dark with the wind in their faces and the roar of the water going down the hill beyond them, and nobody said anything much. Martin collected his chain. He did it in silence, with the lad, and took it round to the barrow, and said to nobody, "I'll want that back Friday."

"It's Friday," said Tessa.

"Next Friday," said Martin, and she saw his mouth move.

Nobody said well done. She noticed that afterward. Nobody came up to her and put a hand on her arm and told her she had saved the town, or the lake, or the night, or anything at all. It would have been absurd. There was nothing to be thanked for. The thing had been done by forty people with their hands, over four days, in the wet, and it was not a thing that anyone had done, only a thing that was happening, a small loud wet slow ordinary thing. Pete looked at her once in the lamplight, across the hut, and nodded. It was the whole of it. She found that it was exactly enough.

Ben came and stood beside her in the doorway at half past ten.

He did not say anything. He stood shoulder to shoulder with her in the rain, in the lee of the hut wall, with a mug of Patrick's tea in

both hands, looking out over the black empty channel where the water was going. It was a long time before he spoke.

"Thank you for holding."

"You said."

"I know I said." He did not look at her. "I'd not have blamed you."

"I'd have blamed me."

"Yes," said Ben. He drank. "I think you would." He was silent for a while. The rain drove sideways across the beam of the lamp. "It's not mended, is it? It's not—what we've done. It's not forgiven."

"No."

"I only wanted to say it's a start."

"Yes."

"It's not nothing."

"It's not," said Ruth.

He nodded. He stood a moment longer, with his shoulder against hers, and then went in to find Marit.

• • •

She walked down to the intake at midnight, alone, with a lamp, because it was her own and she had not seen it since morning.

It was a squat grey tower at the foot of the crest with a stair cut down its side to the water, and on its inner wall, painted in white by somebody dead, were the marks: the old chief's marks, a ladder of black lines and numbers going down into the lake, with a date beside every one. She stood on the top step in the wind with the lamp held out. The reservoir lay below her, black and enormous and silent, with the rain pocking its surface in a million small rings, and at the foot of the wall, three steps down, the water stood against the stone. She looked at it.

It was a finger below the line it had stood at on Monday morning.

It was not much. It was the width of one finger on a wall in the dark. She stood there with the lamp, and the wind pulling at the flame, and the great thick roar still going on somewhere under her

feet, and she did the sum. She did it carefully, in her head, as she had done the followers in October. A finger in six hours. A hand's width at the gate. The lake stood a long way above the sill, and below the sill there was nothing. She did it twice. She did it a third time, to be sure, and then she stood still, with the lamp swaying, and let it come.

Nine days. Perhaps ten. If the gate held, and the nut held, and the front did not turn worse, and the engineer said yes. If there was no joint, no run, no brown water at the toe. Ten days of this, with the wheel and the lamps and the reliefs, and then the long grey patient work of keeping a hole open in the bottom of a dam while the town went dark above it.

It had not even begun.

She stood on the step and looked at the water. Then she turned, and went back up the stair, and along the crest in the wind, to the hut, because it was twelve, and she had the next four hours.

PART FIVE

The lower water

25

Below the intake

After the first night it was only work, and the work was mostly waiting.

They opened it further at first light on Saturday, with the engineer's voice thin in the control room saying go on, and the gate took it a hand at a time, with the lamps shaking and the wind going down the channel in a long moan. On Sunday it was a quarter. On Monday, after a long argument over the speaker and a reading nobody liked, they held it where it was and watched the toe, and the toe ran clear. The rain came and went. The front blew itself out over the ridge on Tuesday night and left a hard bright cold with a skin of ice on the puddles, and the lake, which had been a grey blind sheet all that month, began to show its edges.

She watched it every morning from the top step of the intake tower. It was not a thing one could see go. One could only see that it had. A finger on the white wall, and then a hand. A ring of dark stone at the shore, where there had been none. A drowned fence post, standing out of the shallows by the old landing with a rag of weed on it. By Wednesday the weed line along the dam face, which had been a hand's breadth too low in October, was a good yard clear of the water, and the whole long grey slope of the concrete stood bare

and streaked in the low sun like something that had been lifted out of a bath.

It was a thing one got used to. That was what she had not expected. One got used to the wheel, and the reliefs, and the long cold hours on the crest with a thermos, and the five lamps in the dark. Pete's gang had a song for the outlet path. Marit moved her ledger into the hut and slept in a chair with her boots on. The lads learned to read the weir. At some point in the third day the noise of the water going out of the bottom of the lake, which had been, on the first night, a thing like the end of the world, became a sound as ordinary as a kettle, and she caught herself, on the stair, going about her work with her head on one side, listening for it, as one listens for a child.

• • •

The generation limit was a mark on the wall, and everyone knew where it was.

It was a line in white paint on the inner face of the intake tower, a hand above the mouth of the pipe, with the old chief's date beside it. Below that line the turbines would starve. They would draw air, and shudder, and the number two would go first, as it had always gone first. It was the one fixed fact in the whole business, and she had known it since she was twenty-six: when the water reached that line there would be no more power in Alder Falls. She had never once thought it would be a thing she did on purpose.

They had agreed it on the Wednesday, the four of them, at the bench. Ben said it. He said it to the ration sheet, in his flat quiet voice. They would run to the line and not past it. They would give the town warning. They would use the last day for what could be used. They would stop the machines themselves, cleanly, in order, rather than let the lake do it by starving them, because a machine that was stopped could be started again.

"When?" said Martin.

"Saturday. If it holds. Late." Ben did not look up. "I'd like to say noon. It's not going to be noon. It's going to be five or six, when the lake says."

"Then tell them."

"I'm going to."

He did. He did it from the school step on Thursday, with June beside him and the bell, in four plain sentences on a card. Nobody argued. They had been waiting for it for eight days, and when it came they went about it as people go about a bad tooth they have decided to have out.

Alder Falls had three days to finish what it could.

It was a strange thing to watch. She walked down through it on Friday with the book under her arm and could not tell, afterward, whether it was grief or industry. Martin ran the big lathe twelve hours, and then, at the last, with a sort of grim fury, the one under the grey sheet that he had never once started, because somebody had told him there would be a day when it had to be. It ran for forty minutes. It cut a single bar of mild steel into a single clean short length, and he stood and looked at it, and switched it off, and put the length in his pocket. Kit and his motor man took the cold store apart, shelf by shelf, in the cold, with Marit's help, and carried it all up the hill, a side of beef and four hundred pounds of cheese and nine hundred of butter, to the school, where June had set trestles and a ledger and wrote down every parcel as it came. A woman sat on the chapel step all Friday afternoon sewing a quilt on a machine that ran on the last of the mains. She was nearly done by dusk. She finished the last seam and sat there with her hands in her lap, in the cold, looking at it.

Patrick emptied the shop.

He did it on the Friday, quietly, on his own, without telling anyone. She saw it from the lane. The cold shelf at the back had been the pride of the place, a long steel cabinet he had saved eight years to buy, humming in the dark behind the counter with its door-seals

gleaming, and it was open. It stood empty, with its racks pulled out, and he was going along the street with a barrow, with a cloth over it. He stopped at every door. He gave a parcel of butter to one, and a wedge of cheese to the next, and a coil of sausage and a side of bacon, with no remark; and when the barrow was empty he went back in and began to scrub the cabinet out with a brush and a bucket of hot water, whistling, flat, as he had whistled all his life.

"I'd only have to throw it out," he said, when she asked. He did not look up. "It'd go bad by Tuesday. I'd rather it was eaten." He sloshed the brush. "It's a good cabinet. I'll want it clean. I'll want it clean when it comes back on."

"Patrick."

"It'll come back on," said Patrick. He scrubbed. "Ruth. Go and see to your dam."

• • •

She passed the laundry at four on Saturday, because it was on the way, and saw the steam.

It stood at the door in a thin white feather, in the freezing air, and she heard the drum before she saw it, a long slow roll and slosh and a groaning of the old belt. It was running. She stopped in the lane. The door stood open on the lamplit room and the great steel machine going round with the soap sliding down its glass, and at the mangle, with her sleeves up and her hair tied in a knot and her back bent, Helen was feeding a long grey rope of wet sheeting through the rollers.

She stood and watched. She did not go in.

It was the last load. It was the lodging-house woman's, she saw, six double sheets and the pillow-slips, that had stood in the sacks by the wall since the Monday; and Helen had come back down the river road that morning, with nobody's leave, and lit the fire under the copper and started the drum. She worked without hurry. She fed the sheet through. She caught it at the other end and folded it, in

four, in eight, and laid it on the pile. Her face was bent, and still. Ruth could not see what it said.

She went in.

"Last one," said Helen. She did not turn round.

"I heard."

"I thought, while there's the power." She fed the sheet. "It's for the lodging-house woman. Her guests are going to the district. She's to have them dry." She caught the end. "I thought somebody ought to finish a thing."

"I could—"

"You could not. You've a dam." She laid the folded sheet on the pile and pressed it flat with the heel of her hand. "It's all right, Mum. I didn't come for you."

"No."

"I came for the sheets." She straightened, then, and wiped her forehead on her wrist, and looked at the drum, going round with its iron door and its grey weight of water, and her mouth moved. "It's a good machine."

"It is."

"I'll want it when it comes back."

She said it plainly, in the same voice. Ruth stood in the steam at the door and said nothing, because it was a thing she could not promise, and because Helen knew it, and because there was a place in her chest where something was beginning to ache and would not go away.

"I'll leave you to it," said Ruth.

"Do."

She went out into the cold. It was only when she had gone fifty yards that she heard, behind her, the long slow lift of the mangle begin again.

• • •

They stopped the machines at ten to six, as the last of the light went off the hill.

It was not the line. It was a finger above it, by Ben's reckoning, with a margin; he had said clean, and in order, and he wanted to do it standing up. They stood in the machine hall under the lamps, the four of them, Ben and Ruth and Tessa and a lad, with Martin by the door and Marit with the ledger, and nobody said anything. It was cold. The great iron casings stood in their rows with their covers on and a thin dust of dry rust on the floor between, and the two machines turned in their housings with the long, steady, low, even note that she had heard every day of her life.

"Number two," said Ben.

She put her hand on the lever. It was cold and smooth and she knew it as she knew the back of her own hand. She had pulled it a thousand times. She felt, for the first time, what it was. It was a switch. It was a bit of iron on a spindle, and when she drew it down a quarter inch, in her own hand, a long way behind it a great weight of water would stop falling.

She drew it down.

The note changed. It dropped, a half tone, and another, and then it began to fall in long slow steps, like a man going down a stair in the dark, and the light in the lamps flickered and went amber. The casing under her hand began to cool. She felt it go. She stood with her palm against the iron and her eyes shut and felt the thing she had put her whole life beside go quiet, a long way down, from the middle outward, like a hand going still in sleep. It took a minute. It was the longest minute she had ever lived.

"Number one," said Ben, very low.

She went to the second and did it again.

Then there was a sound, and the sound was no sound. It was a space. It was a great plain hollow stillness that came down over the machine hall like a cloth, as if the whole building had let out its

breath, and in it she heard everything that she had never in her life been able to hear: the drip of a leak in the roof. A lad breathing. The tick of the cooling iron. The lamps hissed. The voice of the water in the channel, far off, going away down the hill.

She took her hand from the lever.

The whole station felt different. She could not have said how. It was the same room, the same floor, the same cold grey light, and it was another place entirely, a place that had stopped being a thing that was *on* and become a thing that was only there. A tin shed full of iron. She looked at Ben. He was standing straight with his hands at his sides and his face turned up, listening, and she saw his throat move.

"That's the lot," said Marit, from the ledger. She said it very quietly. "Five fifty-one."

Nobody said anything.

She went out. She went through the door and down the three steps and out onto the apron in the dark, and stood there with her hands hanging at her sides in the great cold quiet, and looked at Alder Falls.

It had gone out. She watched it go. It was not all at once. It went in ones and twos, up the hill, as she stood: the lamp over the chapel door, the long window of the school, the bright small panes of the lodging house, the cold store, the clinic, the workshop with its bare yellow oblong. Each one hung a moment in the black and then went, without a sound. Then there was only the dark, the hill and the roofs and the long cold shoulder of the dam, with the stars very large over it, and a thin smell of woodsmoke, and, far down by the river, one lamp in a shed window where somebody was finishing a sheet.

It was over. She stood on the apron in the quiet and understood it. Nothing had broken that she knew of. Nobody had died. The dam stood in the starlight where it had always stood, bare and grey and enormous, and the lake lay behind it lower than it had been in thirty years, and the town was dark. It was only the thing itself. The loss. It

had been under everything all those weeks, and now it was out in the air with her, in the cold, and it was hers.

26

Food that will not keep

The first thing the dark did was make everyone hungry.

It was Helen who noticed. She woke on the Sunday on a pallet by the school stove with her daughter's knees in her back and a grey light coming in at the high windows, and lay still for a minute listening to the room: a hundred and forty people breathing, and a baby, and the stove ticking, and the long soft sound of someone trying not to cough. Then she sat up and found she was starving. It was not the ordinary hunger of the morning. It was the hollow, sharp, whole-body kind that comes after a death. It was in all of them. She could see it in the faces round her, in the sleepers' sunken cheeks and the way the first ones up were standing about in their stockings in the cold light with their hands hanging, looking at the trestles.

The trestles were full. That was the trouble. They stood in two long rows down the middle of the room, under a grey cloth, heaped with what had come up the hill in the last three days: the whole of the cold store, and the shop's cabinet, and the larders of every house on the river road. A side of beef. Cheeses like grindstones. Butter in blocks the size of bricks, going soft in the stove's breath, and a great tin tub of dripping, and forty pounds of sausage in loops, and trays of eggs, and hams, and a dozen cold chickens laid out in a row with their legs crossed, and beside them all June at the end of

the table in her scarf with a ledger and a pen, white-faced, reading out a list.

"It'll not keep," said June, to the room. "None of it. We've till Wednesday for the soft things and Friday for the rest, and then it's the cold or it's nothing. So it's to be eaten. I'm sorry. I'll want everyone to eat twice what they like."

There was a ripple of something that was not quite a laugh.

Helen found that she had been given the washing.

Nobody had asked her. It had simply happened, in the way of things, in the first hour, when the lodging-house woman had come past with an armful of blankets and said, "There's the sheets. There's fifty-one of them. Where do they go?" and she had said, before she thought, "I'll see."

• • •

She did it with a copper, a trough and eleven buckets.

The water was the thing. There was none. The town pump, which was gravity and electric both, had run its last in the dusk on Saturday, and a long grey cold hush had come down the hill with the dark. The standpipe in the school yard gave a trickle. It gave a thin brown stream, with a cough in it, for two hours in the morning and two in the evening, and the rest of the time it stood silent, and there was a queue at it from five, a long line of people in their coats with a bucket each and a face of dour patience. The river was there. It was a hundred yards down the lane, brown and quick and cold. They would have to carry.

She made a chain. It took her till ten. She set Pete's boys at the river with the two yoke-buckets, and a girl on the lane with a barrow, and the old man's hens, which had been put in a basket by the school gate, were the only creatures in Alder Falls that did not seem to have noticed anything. She borrowed the copper from the chapel. She lit it with a bundle of the old school's broken desks. She found a corner of the hall by the second stove, at the end of the long north

wall, where there was a bit of warmth and a stone floor that would take a spill, and put the trough there, and a line above it on two pegs.

"Wash," she said, to the first woman in the queue.

• • •

It was the woman from the bend who said it.

She came up at four, in the dusk, as Helen was wringing the last of the morning's sheets over the trough with her hands raw and her back one long dull ache. She had her baby on her shoulder, asleep. She stood with her feet apart and her face pinched with tiredness and a kind of stiff pride, and she did not say anything for some time. Then she said, in a voice without any particular heat, "You've the warm corner."

Helen did not look up. "It's the only place the copper goes."

"Your daughter's cot's by the stove."

"It's a pallet."

"It's by the stove." The woman shifted the baby. "I've a pallet by the door. It's next to a draught. It's the draught from the lane. I've not been warm since Monday, and the baby's had a cough since yesterday." She did not raise her voice. "I'm not saying anything. I'm saying you've the corner, and you've the stove, and you've your own girl by it. I only thought somebody should say."

Helen put down the sheet.

It was so. That was what she could not stand. She turned it over, standing there in the lamplit steam with the cold water running down her wrists, and could not find the place where it was not true. She had walked a hundred yards that morning to find the best place in the hall for the copper, and she had chosen the warm one. She had set her own child's pallet by it, because it was the only place the child slept. She had told herself it was for the washing.

"I carried your sheets," said Helen.

"I know you did."

"I carried your baby's things, on the Monday, for nothing. I walked them up the hill in a barrow. I took the washing from your house in the dark when the river road was empty, and I did it by hand, in November, and I've not taken a penny." She heard her own voice go up, thin and hard, and could not stop it. "I put your name on June's list. I put you on the first run. I'd not call that nothing."

"I didn't say it was."

"You said I'd the corner."

"You have."

"And what would you have me do? Put the copper in the draught?" She had her fists on her hips. Her throat was hot. "It's a fire, I can't move a fire. It's a stone floor. I've fifty-one sheets and no water and a child that's asked me four times since breakfast when we're going home, and you want me to move my daughter's bed to the door—"

"No," said the woman.

She said it quietly. She was looking at Helen with her tired, plain, unyielding face, and Helen saw, to her horror, that she was not angry at all. She was only tired, and had a cough in the baby's chest, and had come to say a thing, and had said it.

"I'd have you put mine there," said the woman. "Beside yours. For a night. It's all I'd ask."

She stood there. The steam rose between them, and the stove ticked, and on the line above her head eight wet sheets hung still.

"Bring it," said Helen. She heard how it came out, short and ungracious, and could not help it. "Bring the pallet. I'll move the trough a yard."

"Thank you."

"Don't," said Helen. "It's a pallet. I'd have moved it for a stranger." And then, because it was a lie, and because the woman's eyes were wet, she said, in a different voice, "It's only that I've not slept either."

• • •

"Can we go home?" said her daughter.

It was Monday, and they were sitting on the pallet in the grey of the dawn, with a blanket over both their knees, eating bread and dripping off a tin plate. She had been asking since Sunday. She asked it now in the small flat reasonable voice she used for a thing she did not expect to be answered, with her eyes on the plate. Her hair had not been plaited for two days. She had a smear of dripping on her chin.

"Not today."

"Tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"Is the water on?"

"No."

"Is the light on?"

"No."

"Is the drum on?"

"No, love. It's not on. None of it." She wiped the child's chin with her thumb. "Not the water, not the light, not the drum. I don't know how long. It won't be the way it was." She drew breath. "I can't tell you it will."

The child considered this. She did it with her whole face, gravely, a small frown between her brows, chewing, and Helen watched her turn it over, as one turns a coin to see the other side.

"Can we go anyway?"

"Go where?"

"Home. Not for—" She waved her bread. "Not for the light. Just for the house. To see if it's still there."

"It's still there."

"How do you know?"

"I went. I went on Saturday, I did the sheets." She heard herself say it, and heard how foolish it sounded. "It's only a house, love. It's got no fire in it. It's very cold."

"I'd like it," said the child, "even if it's cold."

Helen looked at her. She did not say anything for a long moment, in the grey light, with the stove ticking and the sleepers beginning to stir all round them in the long cold hall, and a baby somewhere beginning to cry. It was a plain request. It was the plainest she had ever been asked, and she had no answer to it, because it was not a question she had been asked by herself.

"Not yet," said Helen. "When it's safe. When the man says."

"What man?"

"The one with the book. The inspector. She says it's not safe on the river road till she's been again." She put her arm round the child. "When she says, we'll go. I'll take you. We'll light a fire."

"Promise?"

"I promise we'll go," said Helen. "I don't promise it'll be nice."

• • •

The truck came on Tuesday.

It was mended. It came up the switchback at nine, in a cold bright light, with its new track rod and its patched cab and a thin plume of blue smoke, and stopped in front of the school with its engine running, and the driver got down and looked at the sky. Half the hall went out to see it. They stood in the road in the cold in their blankets, and nobody said anything, and then somebody laughed, and it went round, a low rueful ripple, like wind in grass.

The lodging-house woman went first. She went with a trunk and a carpet bag and the fifty-one sheets, which Helen had washed and dried by the stove and folded, in four, in eight, and tied in a cloth. She stood at the tailboard in her good coat. She did not say much. She said she had a sister in the district with a spare room, and a business to be started there in the spring, and that she would be back, and Helen said, "Of course you will," and the woman looked at her and did not answer.

The woman from the bend went after. She went with her husband and the baby, and a boy of ten, and a goat on a string, which had been a condition. She stopped at the tailboard with the baby on her shoulder and looked down at Helen in the cold bright air, and her eyes were wet. "I'd have stayed," she said. "I would. It's only the cough."

"I know it is."

"I didn't mean what I said."

"You did," said Helen. "It was right." She put up her hand and touched the baby's back, very lightly, through the shawl. "Go. Get her warm. Send me word."

They went. Fourteen of them, by noon, in two loads, with their bundles and their children and their small stubborn goods: Pete's family with their dog, and the two sisters from the end of the lane, and the family of five. She helped to load. She lifted a trunk, and a rolled quilt, and a lad onto the bed of the truck by his belt. She said, at each, the same plain things: *you've the card*; *there's a woman at the housing office*; *ask for the corridor.* She watched the truck go down the switchback with the sun on its bonnet and a hand waving from the back, and she stood in the road with the cold in her fingers and watched it till it turned the bend.

It was a strange feeling. She had not expected it. She had given them the seats herself, on a ration sheet. She had said it was right. She stood in the road in the sun and found that she was angry, and could not find anyone to be angry at, and that underneath the anger was another thing that she had not known she had, a small thin cold ache like the draught from a door: they had gone. They had been given a way out, and they had taken it, and she had not.

She went back into the school. She did not look at the empty pallets by the door.

• • •

The inspector walked the river road on Wednesday at nine with a long staff and a tape, and Helen went with her, because it was her road.

It was not as they had left it. She had known the river had come up. She had heard it through the wall of the hall for three nights running, a deep steady shouldering sound, and had not known how far. The channel took what the gate gave it, and the gate gave a good deal, and it all went down the old trench round the shoulder of the hill and into the river below the bridge, and the river took it, brown and thick and fast, a foot over the mark that had been painted on the old man's gatepost in a year nobody could name. The footbridge to the cottages had gone. Two iron trestles stood in the stream with nothing between them.

They came to the old man's house at ten. The plank was still leaning on the gatepost. The shed with its tin roof stood where it had stood. But the bank had gone from under the steps. It had slumped in the night, the whole shoulder of it, into the water, and taken the bottom six of the nine; the other three hung out over a brown drop with their crack and their chipped edge like the end of a shelf. The cellar was a pond. A long diagonal crack ran up the back wall, wide at the top, and the kitchen door stood out of true in its frame and would not shut.

The inspector stood and looked at it a long time. She put her staff on the ground. Then she took out her book and wrote in it, and said, without turning, "It's not safe. It's not going to be. I wouldn't sleep in it again."

"It's his."

"I know it is." She closed the book. "It's the release. It's the water we put in. I'll say so in the report. I don't know that it'll help him."

Helen told him at noon, in the school, by the second stove, where he sat with his buttons done wrong and the basket of hens at his feet. She had thought about how for an hour and had said none of it.

She sat down on the bench beside him and told him that the bank had gone from under his steps, and the house had cracked, and the inspector said it wasn't safe.

He said nothing for a long time. He looked at the red hen's comb through the wicker.

"The steps," he said.

"The bottom six."

"I always said they were steep."

"You did."

"Forty-one years." He breathed out through his nose. "It was the dam, then."

She had known he would ask. She had decided on the road that she would not take the easy answer.

"It was what we did to it," said Helen. "They let the water down the channel and it came too high. My mother thought it might. She said it'd be a nuisance."

"And it was."

"It was more than that."

"It's a house," said the old man, with great dignity. "It's not a person." He put his hand down into the basket, and the red hen stepped onto it, and he lifted her into his lap. "You'll not tell me it was nobody's fault."

"No."

"Good," said the old man. "I couldn't be doing with that."

"There's the back room at mine," said Helen. "It's dry. It's two feet over the mark."

He looked at her. "That's what they said about mine."

"Yes."

"It's where the child sleeps."

"She'll sleep in with me. She's been in with me on a pallet a fortnight." It cost something to say, and she said it: the back room was the only room in the house with a door that shut, and she had been

keeping it for the day the drum came back on. “A month. Then we’ll see about another.”

“I’ll be in your road.”

“You’ll be in my road,” said Helen. “Bring the hens.”

He did not say yes. He lifted the red hen out of his lap and put her back in the basket with care, and looked at the stove.

She sat with him until the stove wanted wood. It was a thing that had been done, by decent people for good reasons, and it would not be mended, and when she went to June that afternoon she told her about her own house and not his, because there was nothing June could do.

• • •

She told June on Wednesday that she was going home.

She said it in the store room, over the ledger, in the cold, with the child waiting outside on the step with a slate. She said that the inspector had been at nine, and had walked the river road with a long staff and a tape, and had said it was dry above the high mark, and that the house was above the high mark by a good two feet. She said she would light a fire. She said she would not take the child yet, but that she would go down herself, in the day, and see to the stove.

“And then?” said June.

“And then I’ll see.”

June looked at her over the glasses. She had lost flesh in a fortnight; her face was thinner and sharper than it had been, and her eyes had a bright dry look, like a woman who has not slept but is not going to say so.

“It’s not better,” said Helen. “There’s hot water at the district, I’ve had a bath in it. There’s a clinic with a nurse who knows what a wheeze is, and a bed with a roof that doesn’t drip on the left.” She drew breath. “Mine’s got a stove that draws and a step with a chip in it and nine cups, one without a handle. I’ve no better reason. It’s mine.”

"I know."

"I'd not blame anyone who went."

"I know you wouldn't." June put down the pen. "I'd not either. I'm only saying I'm glad." She seemed to hesitate, a very little. "I'd not have wanted it to be only the ones who couldn't."

Helen did not answer.

She went out. She stood on the school step in the cold bright noon with the child beside her, looking down the long hill to the river road, with its small grey roofs and its brown water and its row of bare trees. A plume of smoke was standing up from one of them, thin and straight in the still air. It was the goat man, she thought, lighting his stove. She walked the child to the shop door, where Patrick was waiting with the button tin, and went on down alone.

27

The machine under the cover

The inspector said it in four sentences, standing in the cold control room with her small book open and her breath showing.

It was a week after the machines stopped. The station had the hollow look of a place whose purpose has been taken out, with the dials dead on their boards and a skin of dust already along the benches, and they had lit the stove in the corner because somebody had thought it ought to be lit. The woman stood with her back to it in her clean oilskin, and Ruth stood at the bench with Ben, and the other inspector sat on an upturned crate and said nothing. It was bright outside. A clear thin sun lay across the window, on the bare dam, and the lake, which had come down another yard, stood very flat and blue.

"The drains are in a poor way," said the inspector. "I'd say most of them, not only the east. We've had the bend open, and the joint, and the toe, and I'd not want to be exact until the report's written. But the bitumen's gone out of the fourth joint for the best part of twelve feet, and there's softening in the concrete round the drain at the bend, and the east gauge was telling you something true." She looked at her book. "It'll want a substantial repair. Not a patch. A good deal of the gallery, and the drains, and probably the joint seals

along the lower third of the face. It'll take a season, and a crew, and money."

"And would it have gone?" said Ben.

She was silent for a moment. She looked at him, and then at his mother, with a tired, honest, not unkind face.

"I can't tell you that," she said. "I'd like to. I'd like to say, you did right, it would have failed at Christmas, you saved the valley. It isn't so. I don't know. Nobody can. It might have held for ten years. It might have held until the next wet spring, and you'd have found out then. What I can tell you is what I'd have signed." She closed the book. "I'd not have signed for the winter. Not with what we've found. I'd have said lower it. I'd have said it was a thing to be done, and sooner than later."

"That's all?" said Ben.

"It's all I've got."

He nodded. He was looking at his own hands on the bench. "It's not what I'd have liked," he said.

"No," said the inspector. "It never is."

• • •

She took the hoist back on the Thursday, on a handcart, with two lads and a rope.

It was a poor thing to carry back. It had gone up the hill a good machine, a great steel chain block on a carriage that Martin's father had made, and it came down it with a bent hook, and a bearing scorched black, and a link gone bright at the stress where Tessa's spreader had held it off the stem. The pump was worse. It had run for a week and a day in the wet, in the cold, on a hose that nobody had thought to lag, and one of its cast housings had cracked from the flange to the foot. She had written it all down on the back of the ration sheet. It was the one thing she had learned that month: write it, before one is asked.

The workshop yard was quiet. There was no power in it. The door of the big shed stood open on the cold dark, and the yard was full of a thin sharp light and the smell of wet iron, and a hen. She came in through the gate with the cart behind her and stopped, because Martin was standing in the middle of the shed, in his work jacket, with his back to her, looking at the machine.

It was where it had always been, at the far end, under its grey sheet. It had not been moved. It stood there in the dim with its corners tied down and its great flanks sloping away under the tarpaulin like a beast at rest, and the light came across the floor and stopped at its feet. He did not turn.

"Mr Dyer."

"Mrs Sayer." He said it flat. "That's the hoist."

"It is."

"Put it by the wall."

She did. She had the lads wheel the cart in and stand the carriage against the brick, and then she took out the sheet and read it, in order, as she had written it. She read the hook. She read the bearing. She read the link, and the pump, and the housing, and the cracked flange, and what she thought each would cost, and what she thought she could do. He listened to it without a word, with his back to her, with his hands in his jacket pockets, and the dust turning in the light.

"I broke the hook on Friday at the wheel," she said. "When we put the second chain on. I didn't see it. I told you after, not before."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are." He turned, then, and looked at her. His face was grey and still and tired, with the lines drawn deep, and there was nothing in it that she could use. "It's a hook. It's a good hook. I've had it twenty years." He walked over to the carriage and put his hand flat on the bent steel, and took it away. "I'll make another."

"I'll pay you for it."

"In what?"

She did not answer.

"You've not a penny," said Martin. He said it gently. "There's nothing in the station. There's nothing in the town. You'll pay me in a month, if you can, in whatever there is, and I'll write it in the book, and I'll not expect it." He looked at the housing, and at the cracked flange, and shook his head slowly. "It's not a bad pump. It's done more work in a week than in the last year. I'd sooner it broke on that than on a cellar."

"Martin—"

"Don't."

She stopped.

"I know what you're going to say," said Martin. "You're going to say it was good of me. You're going to say thank you for the lathe." He did not raise his voice. He stood in the dim shed with his big scarred hands hanging. "Don't. A machine under a sheet I can't run, a lathe with a hole in it, no work, no wages and a girl with a letter in her pocket. I did it because it needed doing. I'd not want it made into something."

"No."

"I'd not want us friends."

"No," said Ruth.

"The hook paid for," said Martin, "and the diesel, and the axle, all in the book, in your hand." He looked at her. "And if anyone asks, I knew what I was lending. I'm not having it said I was talked into it."

"I'll say it."

"Good." He turned and went to the door of the shed, and stood looking out across the yard at the wet grey light, with his back to her, a heavy square man in a jacket. "It's a good machine," he said, to the air. "The big one. I've not had it an hour."

"No."

"Forty minutes. On a bar of steel." He gave a short dry sound that was not a laugh. "I'd thought it would be more."

She stood there. She did not say anything. After a moment she picked up the sheet, and folded it, and put it in her pocket, and went out through the yard past the lads and the cart, and he did not turn round.

• • •

June was in the school, and she was being shouted at.

She stood by the stove under the chalk dam, which nobody had rubbed out, with her ledger held against her chest like a shield, in her good dark scarf, and a ring of people round her, and a man's voice going on in the middle of it. Ruth stopped in the door. She had come to ask a thing. She stood and listened, because she could do nothing else.

It was the allocation. It was always going to be. There were fourteen who had gone to the district on Tuesday, and eleven more waiting, and the second truck, and who was on it. There was a woman with a child who said that she had been on June's list from the first, and had been put off, and had been told *next run* three times, and that the lodging-house woman, who owned a house, had gone before her. There was an old man who said that the best of the cheese had gone to the clinic. There was a man who said that the hall was not warm enough and that June had put the Aldouses nearest the stove. June answered them in turn. She answered in a low even voice, and wrote things down. She said that the lodging-house woman had been on the first list because of the guests. She said that she would look into the cheese. She said that she would put the pallets by the stove in order of chest, and not in order of name, and that anyone who thought she had erred was welcome to count.

"It's not fair," said the man.

"No," said June. "It's not. I never said it was."

"You've favoured—"

"I've favoured whoever was nearest," said June. "Thirty years. It's a bad way and it's the only one I've got, and if you've a better, I'm listening." She looked round the ring. "A hundred and forty names, a hall that holds ninety, three stoves, and I've not slept since Thursday. Somebody do it, and I'll give him the ledger."

Nobody took it.

They drifted off. They went in ones and twos with their faces set, muttering, and June stood with the book against her chest and her white head up till the last had gone, and then she let her shoulders down and said, to the stove, in a small dry voice, "He promised me Tuesday."

"Who?"

"The man at the district. About the water. A pump, and a tank. He said Tuesday." She wiped her eyes briskly on her sleeve. "It's Thursday. I'm going to have to go and stand there. I'll go in the morning, on the truck, and sit in his office till he gives it me." She looked at Ruth, then, with her sharp tired round face, and said, "What do you want?"

She had thought what she would say. She had thought it all the way down the hill, with the sheet in her pocket and the sun in her eyes, and it was a short thing, and it had come to her on the road, with a kind of surprise.

"I can't put it back," said Ruth.

June waited.

"The station. The power. The whole of it. I've been told what it needs, by two inspectors and an engineer, and it's a season's work and a crew and money, and I've not got any of them. I can't say it'll be mended by spring. I'll not say it. I don't know." She drew breath. "I can do one thing. It's small. It's a thing I can say I'll do."

"Say it."

"There's a generator. A small one. It's in the shed behind the pump house, it's a small diesel set, it was the old chief's, it's not been run in six years. It'll run a pump. It'll run a pump on the school

standpipe, for an hour in the morning and an hour at night, if I can find the diesel, and Tessa can get me a hose. It's not much. It's water, in the school, from the tank, that's clean." She stopped. "Two weeks. I'll have it by then. I'll write down what I need today."

"Just that."

"Just that," said Ruth. "I'll not promise the rest."

June looked at her for a long time. The stove ticked. On the wall above them the chalk dam looked down, with its rainbow and its fishes, and its great round sun.

"Water," said June, at last. "In the school."

"Yes."

"In two weeks."

"Yes."

"I'll hold you to it," said June, and wrote it down.

28

Shared readings

They read the gauges at seven, and they read them together, and Ben wrote down what they said.

It had been his idea, and it had taken him a week to say it. It was the middle of December. The station lay dead under a hard white frost, with the lake gone black and small behind the dam and the long grey wall of the concrete showing its whole stained face to the weather like something taken out of its coat. There was nothing to run. There was nothing to do but look at it. They went along the gallery every morning with two lamps and the book, his mother in front and himself behind, in the thin light from the high vent and the dry cold that smelled of old stone, and at each gauge they stopped, and each of them read it, aloud, and then each of them wrote it down.

That was the rule. There were four. He had set them out at the bench on the first Monday, in his square capitals on the back of the ration sheet, and she had read them standing, with her eyes going down, one at a time, and said, "Yes." They would each read every instrument. They would each write the number before either said what it meant. They would each sign the line. And nobody would write the word *good*, or *better*, or *as expected*, in the margin of the book, until a second person had agreed it, in writing, with a date.

"What if I think it's better?" she had said.

"Then you write what you think, and I write what I think, and we look."

"And if we don't agree?"

"Then it goes down as we don't agree," said Ben. "Both. In both hands." He had not looked at her. "It's not a punishment. I'd have it the same if it were me."

She had looked at the sheet a long time. "It's a good rule," she had said. And then, very drily, "It's a long time since anyone checked my sums."

It was not warm. It was not easy. But it was a thing that could be done, and was being done, in daylight, with the lamps, and it held.

• • •

It was on the eleventh morning that he caught himself.

It was a bright hard day, with frost on the crest and a pale sun coming over the ridge in a long low shaft that lit the whole gallery gold at the high vent. They had done the toe and the weir, and the drains one by one, and come to the east gauge at the end, where the needle stood in its glass. He had bent to read it. And his heart had given a small hard jump.

It was low. It was the lowest it had been since the previous October, a good thumb's width under the chalk mark, and the weir in its box was down to a thin clean sheet over the notch, and the whole gallery was dry as a bone. He stood there in the cold with his lamp in his hand and felt it come up in him, warm and sweet and enormous, like a drink on an empty stomach. It was draining. It had worked. The lake was down, and the head was off the dam, and the thing they had been afraid of had nothing to push on and was lying quiet. He opened his mouth.

"That's—" said Ben.

He stopped.

He stood there with his mouth still open and the warm glad word in it, a good, round, plain one, ready. *Better.* He had it on his tongue.

He had been about to say it aloud, in the lamp-lit cold, with his mother standing a yard behind him with the book, as a man says a thing that is simply true. And he heard, very clearly, in the long low gallery, the voice of a woman in a back room behind the store, saying in a dry level tone: *I can say there's no sign it's about to fail*?

He had hated that. He had hated it for six weeks. He had gone out of that room with his hand on the latch, white to the lips, because she had given a thing that was true, in a shape it was not.

He closed his mouth.

"What?" said Ruth.

"Nothing." His voice came out odd. "Read it."

She came up beside him and bent, and read. She said the number. He wrote it. He wrote his own beneath it, in the book, in his own hand, in the cold, with the pencil pressed hard, and he did not write the word. He thought about it. He stood there, with the lamp swinging, and made himself think: what do I know? He knew that the lake was down. He knew that the head on the dam was less by a great deal. He knew that a low lake pushed a low gauge, whatever the drain did, and that the reading he was looking at was not a thing that told him how the drain was. It told him how the lake was. It was only the water, going down. It was the same thing as the weir.

He wrote: *low, with lake.* He wrote the date. He did not write *better*.

He handed her the pencil. She took it and read what he had written, in the lamplight, for a long moment, with her head bent, and then she wrote under it, in her own small upright hand: *Agree.*

She did not look at him. She closed the book.

"I nearly said it," said Ben.

"I know."

"I had it in my mouth. I was going to say, that's better."

"I know you were." She tucked the book under her arm. "You'd have been wrong."

"Would I?"

"You'd have been right and wrong. It's the lake." She turned her face, a little, and in the dim he could not read it. "I've said it a hundred times, Ben. In that voice. I know how it feels. It feels like the truth." She went on, in the same dry level tone, along the gallery toward the light. "It's the worst thing about it."

He stood and looked at her back going away from him down the long wet concrete. He had had the word in his mouth. He had been a half-breath from saying it.

• • •

He took the lamp to the kitchen on the Thursday.

It was a small thing. It was an old brass table lamp, with a green glass shade and a chipped foot, that had hung in the kitchen of the house on the hill since before he was born, and it had been flickering for a month. Patrick had mentioned it on Sunday over the soup, in passing, with his mouth full. Ben had taken it down that night to look at, and had carried it about the station for four days in a cloth, and not got to it. It was a kerosene one. It did not need a power station. It wanted a wick, and a cleaned burner, and somebody who would sit down with it and look.

It was dusk when he came up the lane. It was a cold clear violet dusk, with a hard star over the ridge and the first frost beginning to glitter on the cobbles, and a smell of woodsmoke and boiled cabbage coming from every chimney on the hill. He had the lamp in a cloth under his arm and a screwdriver in his pocket. He had meant to go straight in. He stopped at the gate.

She was sitting on the yard wall.

She sat there in the cold with her back against the gatepost, in the long brown coat, with her hands in her sleeves and her chin down, looking at nothing. There was nobody with her. She was not doing anything. It was, he thought, the first time in his life he had seen her sit on a wall.

"Mum."

"Ben." She did not turn her head. "Is that the lamp?"

"Dad said it flickered."

"It's the burner. It's clogged." She looked at the cloth under his arm. "It's been clogged since the summer. I said I'd see to it."

"You said that about a good many things."

It came out before he could stop it. It fell in the cold air between them like a dropped plate, and he heard it, and she heard it, and neither of them moved.

"I did," said Ruth.

"I didn't mean—"

"You did." She said it mildly. "It's all right. It's so."

He stood at the gate with the lamp in his arm and did not know what to do with his face. He had not meant to say it. He had come with a lamp. He had thought, if he had thought anything, that he would go in and sit at the table with the old brass thing in the lamplight with a bit of wire and a rag, and his father would make a joke, and nobody would say anything at all. He had not meant to stand in the road at dusk with a thing like that in his mouth.

"Sit down," said Ruth.

"I've the lamp."

"Put it on the wall."

He put it on the wall. He sat down beside it, a yard from her, on the cold stone, with his knees up and his hands between them, and for a long time neither of them spoke. The violet in the sky went slowly to grey. A dog barked a long way down the hill. In the window of the house behind them a light came on, yellow, and he saw his father cross it, with a pan.

"I can't say it's— I don't know what it is," said Ben.

"No."

"I'd like to. I'd—" He rubbed his face. "I'd like to say I understand, it's over, I'd have done the same. It's not— I wouldn't. I don't think I— And on Monday I nearly did, with a gauge. I didn't. It's not the same

thing, I don't know why it's not, and I don't know what that makes me."

"It makes you somebody who stopped."

"I don't know that I'd call it that."

"No," said Ruth. "I wouldn't either." She was silent a moment. "I'm not asking you to forgive it."

"Good."

"Sorry about the room." She stopped. He heard her draw breath. It was a thing he had never in his life heard her do, a long slow shaky breath in the cold, with a little catch in it. "I didn't say the last bit. You were waiting for it, and I knew."

"I was."

"I knew you were." She looked at her hands. "I could feel it. And I didn't. And I let you go out of the door."

He said nothing. He had thought, for six weeks, of what he would say if she said it, and he had it ready, all of it, in order. It was no use. It stood there in his head like a speech to an empty room. He looked at her profile in the failing light, the thin brown cheek and the grey wisp at the temple, and the line of her mouth, which was quite steady, and found that he could not make any of it come.

"I don't know what to do with that," said Ben.

"No."

"I'd thought I would."

"Yes."

"It's—" He shook his head. "I'm glad you said it. I think I'm glad. I don't think it changes—"

"No," said Ruth. "It doesn't."

They sat. The grey went out of the sky and the stars came out, one and then another and then a great crowd of them, small and bright and still, over the black ridge and the bare dam, and the cold came up through the stone. The window behind them went gold. He heard the stove door clang. He heard his father's voice, humming something flat.

"Ruth!" called Patrick, from the door. "Ben! Is that you? Are you coming in, or are you sitting out there to be admired?"

"Coming," said Ruth.

"I've a pie. It's only half a pie. It's a lot of half."

"I've the lamp," said Ben.

"Bring the lamp." A pause. "Bring the pair of you."

Neither of them moved. They sat on the wall in the dark with a yard of cold stone between them and the old brass lamp standing on it, with its chipped foot and its green shade, and a smell of kerosene and woodsmoke. It was a long time before she spoke.

"It's the burner," she said. "You'll want a pin."

"I've a pin."

"Then you'll not need me."

"No," said Ben. He picked up the lamp, and got down off the wall, and stood a moment in the frozen road with it held against his chest. "I'd like it if you came in."

He did not look round. He walked up the path with the lamp, and at the door he heard her get down, slowly, and come after, and shut the gate.

29

A *room to leave*

Tessa left on the Saturday before Christmas, on the grain truck, with one bag, and nobody made a speech.

It was Patrick who carried the bag. He did it as he did everything for people he was fond of, in a manner so offhand that it could not be thanked. He came down the stair from the room over the shop at eight in the dark and the frost with the canvas holdall over one shoulder and a loaf under the other arm, and said it was only a bag, and that the loaf was only stale, and that he had been going that way. He went on down the lane in front of her toward the yard gate, where the truck stood with its engine running and its lamps lit, with the sort of cheerful unhurried tramp that he had used to take his own children to school. Tessa followed with her hands in her sleeves. She did not say anything. She looked, Ruth thought, from the step of the house, like a person who has been told she may go and is waiting for somebody to say she mustn't.

It was inconvenient. It would be a great deal worse than inconvenient, in a fortnight, when someone had to cut the next nut. It was also entirely right, and Ruth had told nobody that she thought so, because it would have been a kind of insult.

She went down after them.

• • •

Martin was at the gate.

He stood by the post in his work jacket with his cap pulled low, in the freezing blue of the dawn, a heavy square figure in the breath of the engine, and did not look at anybody. He had not asked her. Ruth knew that. He had said to Ruth on the Thursday, over the ledger, with great plainness, that he would not, because there was nothing to ask her for; and that if she went, she went, and he would write it in the book. He stood with his hands in his pockets and watched the girl come down the lane, and when she reached the truck he took one out. It had something in it, wrapped in a bit of chamois.

"Here," said Martin.

Tessa stopped.

"They're mine. My father's." He held them out, a pair of steel calipers, long and worn and bright as old silver, in a roll of oiled leather. "They're better than what they'll give you. They'll give you a pair out of a box." He did not look at her. "Mind you don't lose them. I'll want them back."

"When?"

"When I'm dead," said Martin. "Not before."

She took them. She stood a moment in the road with them in her two hands, looking at the leather, and then she put them inside her jacket, next to the letter, and did the button. Her face was set and white and expressionless. He nodded to her, once, and turned away, and began to talk about the axle to the driver with a loud and wholly artificial interest.

She stood by the tailboard. She looked at Ruth.

"I didn't tell him before," she said. "I didn't tell anybody. I wrote on the Saturday after the stop. I said I'd come before Christmas, if they'd have me early. They said they would." She drew breath. "I thought if I said I was staying and then went it would be worse."

"It would."

"I don't want you to say it's right."

"I'm not going to." Ruth had her hands in the pockets of the old brown coat. She had thought what she would say, and had put it by, and it was not a speech. "Can I tell you a thing about a bearing?"

Tessa stared.

"You'll have bores. At the yard. Big ones, and a great many bearings, and they'll all be going." She spoke quickly and dryly, as she had spoken in the gallery for twenty-six years. "You don't hear it. You think you do. You don't, not till it's too late. Take a long screwdriver and put the blade on the housing and put the handle against your ear. Not your hand. Your ear. A good one purrs. One that's going grinds, a long way off, like a person in the next room. You'll know it the first time." She stopped. "The old chief showed me. It's the only thing I'm sure I've got that's any use."

The girl stood still. Her mouth moved. She looked, for a moment, young.

"A screwdriver," she said.

"A long one."

"Against the ear."

"It sounds foolish," said Ruth. "It isn't."

"No." Tessa swallowed. She seemed about to say something and did not, and then she said, in a thick rough hurried voice, "I'll write if I can spell." She got up into the back of the truck, and turned, and sat on the bench with her bag between her boots and her hands over the front of her jacket, where the calipers were. The driver let in the clutch.

She did not wave. She sat looking back at them down the long white lane, small and straight and furious, until the truck went round the bend.

• • •

It was a quiet evening. It was the quietest they had had in three months.

Patrick had made a pie, a good one, with the last of the cheese and a hen that had stopped laying, and they ate it at the kitchen table in the light of the brass lamp with its green shade, which burned now with a clean steady yellow flame and no flicker at all. It threw a round gold light on the cloth. The stove ticked. It was the first time in weeks that they had been in the same room without either of them waiting for the other to speak. They did not say much. Patrick told a long story about a woman at the school and a bucket. Ruth ate her pie.

It was only when the plates were cleared that she said, to the lamp, "You went to cards."

He did not look up. He was wiping the cloth with the flat of his hand.

"That Saturday," said Ruth. "After I'd asked you. You said you'd stay, and I said go, and you went."

"You said go."

"I know I did."

"You asked me to tell a lie across a counter, love, and then you told me to leave." He did not say it angrily. He said it in the plain tired voice of a man stating the date. "I'd a face like a cheese. I went." He folded the cloth. "I'm not sorry I went. I'm sorry it was that night."

"I was angry."

"I know."

"I was angry for a week."

"I know you were," said Patrick. "I could hear it through the floor."

She did not answer. She sat with her hands round her cup, and looked at the lamp, and found that it was not gone. It was still there, small and hard and bright, like a coal under ash; she had thought it was out. It was not that she was angry at him. It was that he had been right, and had been right in a way that she could not forgive and could not argue with, and he had gone to cards, and she had sat in the kitchen with the rain beginning.

"I'm still a bit cross," said Patrick.

"Yes."

"Cross, and very fond of you." He put his big floury hand out across the table and laid it over hers, and it was very warm. "I think those two will have to share a chair."

She looked at the hand. It was a large, plain, scarred, careful one, with a burn across the knuckle from the oven. She turned her own over under it, so that the palms met.

"I can do that," said Ruth.

"Good." He smiled. It was a small crooked tired one. "It's more than I'd have hoped."

The boy knocked at nine.

It was the Aldous boy, in the dark, in the cold, with his cap in his hand and a scarf up to his nose and his chest going from the hill. He stood in the door with the frost on his eyebrows and said, in a high breathless gabble, "It's June. She says to say. The hose has come. And the tank. They came up on the evening truck, in the back, with a man. And the diesel. It's four drums. She says—" He drew breath. "She says if you've the old set ready, it's Thursday. She says to say she'll hold you to it."

Ruth stood up.

She had known it would come. She had written the list herself, on a Thursday, on the back of a ration sheet, in her small upright hand: the set, the pump, the hose, the tank, the diesel. A thing that was hers, and small, and could be done. It had come, as she had said it would. It had come in the back of a truck with a man in a cap, in the dark, on a frozen road, and a boy had run a mile in the cold to say so.

"Tell her it'll be ready," said Ruth.

"She says Thursday."

"Thursday." She heard her own voice, level and dry and steady. "Tell her I've the set stripped. I've the seal. Tessa left the notes on the bench." She drew breath. "Tell her to bring the lads at six."

The boy nodded and was gone, down the dark lane at a run. She stood in the door a moment with the cold coming in about her ankles, looking at where he had been. Behind her the lamp burned steadily. A long way down the hill, small and clear, in the starlight, a dog began to bark, and was answered.

30

The water morning

The set started on the fourth pull, as it had started every morning for a week, and Ruth stood in the doorway of the shed with the crank in her hand and listened to it.

It was not a fine sound. It was a thin cough and a clatter and a long rough stuttering note, like an old man clearing his throat on a stair, and it filled the little shed behind the pump house with blue smoke and the smell of hot oil. The pinion had stuck again. She had tapped it, with a hammer, as she had tapped it for twenty years. It had caught, and turned, and settled to its rough steady beat, and a little way down the yard the pump took up the note, a flat even thud, and the hose that ran along the frozen ground like a long black snake gave a shiver, and swelled.

It was the seventh day. It was the first of January, and a hard bright morning with a skin of ice on every trough, and nobody had told her that it would hold. It had held for six. She had stood here each dawn with her hands in her sleeves and her ear cocked for the miss, and every dawn it had run: an hour at seven, an hour at five, by the school clock, in the light. She had written it in the book. It was in her small upright hand on the ruled page, with the date and the hour and the drum of diesel and the reading on the tank, and a line

down the margin in Ben's capitals, *agree*, each day. It was nothing. It was a pump on a hose, running an hour on a rota.

She let the crank hang. She stood in the cold, with the diesel smoke in her eyes, and watched the hose.

• • •

The school was warm.

It was the first thing she noticed when she came up the lane at half past seven, with the frost cracking under her boots and the smoke of three chimneys standing straight up into a pale gold sky. Someone had propped the great door open with a brick. It stood wide on the dim hall, where the two stoves were lit and roaring, and the warmth came out of it in a long soft wave and met her on the step, the wet, human, crowded warmth of a room with sixty people in it who had put a great deal of work into one fire. It smelled of woodsmoke and wet wool and porridge. It smelled, faintly, of soap.

She stopped in the door.

They had made the hall into a street. It had come about without anybody planning it, over a month, as such things do. There were the pallets along the north wall, rolled and strapped by day. There were the trestles down the middle, where the porridge went, and at the far end under the chalk dam, which nobody had ever rubbed out, the long line at the standpipe, a ragged queue of people with cans and buckets and kettles and a child's tin pail, waiting. They stood in their coats in the steam, talking low, with a patient cheerful glum look, as men stand at a pump in a village in a story. A man was telling something about a goat. A woman at the front had her foot on the bucket, and was watching, with a fixed fierce attention, the spout.

It ran. She could see it from the door. It ran in a thick clear steady rope, with a hollow splash, out of the iron tap on the wall and into the woman's bucket, and filled it, and she lifted it, with a grunt, and went away, and the next stepped up. It was clean. It was cold, and

clear as glass, and it came out of the tap at the rate of a bucket in half a minute, and there was no brown in it, and no cough.

Nobody said anything about it. That was what she noticed. They stood there, and the water ran, and it was an ordinary thing.

By the second stove an old man in a cardigan with the buttons done wrong sat with a basket of hens at his feet and watched the tap. He did not queue. He had been back to the river road once since the Wednesday, to look at Helen's back room, and had said he would think about it.

"I went down," said Ruth.

"Did you."

"On Sunday."

He moved the basket with his foot. "Then you've seen it."

She had. She had stood in the road a long time. "Nine steps," he said, to nobody, as she went on. "I'd have said they were steep."

"Good morning, Ruth," said June.

She was at the end of the line with the ledger, in her scarf, ticking off cans. She looked up with her sharp tired round face, and for a moment her eyes went to Ruth's, and then away, to the book.

"It's running."

"It is."

"I said I'd hold you." She made a small neat tick. "You'll find I've nothing to hold."

"No," said Ruth.

"Don't make a thing of it," said June, to the ledger. "I'm very busy."

A boy had come to the head of the line with six cans on a string. June looked at the cans, and at him.

"Whose?"

"Ours."

"Ours is two."

"The rest are my aunt's."

"Your aunt's on the Tuesday list." She did not write anything. She stood with the pen over the page for some time. "Fill four," she said.

"Tell her I want to see her." He filled four, and went off with the string clinking, and she made a mark in the margin that Ruth could not read, and did not look pleased.

• • •

Helen had the corner by the second stove, and she had it properly, now.

It was a long way from what it had been. She had had a week to build it, with the lodging-house woman's old copper and two borrowed troughs and a line that ran the whole length of the north wall, and she stood in the middle of it in her rolled sleeves with her hair in a knot, up to her wrists in grey suds, and the whole corner steamed. There were sheets on the line. There were forty or fifty of them, hung in rows like sails, dripping onto the stone, and under them a heap of grey blankets waiting, as high as a table, and in front of the heap a long queue of women with their arms full. They had been given a day each. It was the rota, in June's hand. Monday for the river road. Tuesday for the school. Thursday for the chapel. They brought their bedding in sacks and went away with it damp and clean and cold, and Helen charged them a penny or a potato or nothing, and wrote it all down.

It was slow. It was wretchedly slow. She wrung each sheet by hand, with a stick, and carried it across the floor, and it took her the whole of a morning to do what the drum had done in an hour. It was not profitable. She had worked it out, one night on the pallet, with the child asleep beside her, and the sum had come to something very small. But it existed. She had made a thing. It was a poor little laundry in a cold hall, with a copper and a pair of troughs, and it was hers.

"Mum," she said, without looking round.

"Helen."

"You've water."

"It's the pump."

"I know it's the pump." She wrung the sheet. "I've been standing in it since seven. I've done two tubs. They're all clean." She put the sheet over her shoulder. "It's very good water."

It was all she said. It was, Ruth thought, in the steam, with the grey suds running down her daughter's wrists, the most that was going to be said. She stood a moment longer. She saw that there was a child on the stool by the stove, in a blue cardigan, with a slate on her knees and her tongue between her teeth, drawing. The child did not look up. She had a small tin cup beside her on the stone, full of clear water, with a chip in the rim.

"Gran," said the child, to the slate.

"Yes?"

"It's a very good tap."

"It is."

"I drank some," said the child, and went on drawing.

• • •

Martin came for his water at eight, with two buckets, and stood in the line like anyone else.

She saw him come. He came up the lane in his work jacket with a bucket in either hand and his cap pulled low, and did not look to left or right, and went in at the great door and took his place at the end of the queue behind a woman with a kettle. He stood very straight. He said something to the woman, who laughed. He did not look at the front. He stood in the steamy warm hall with his empty buckets, a big square heavy man in the line, patient as a horse, and waited for twenty minutes for his turn, and when it came he stepped up and put the first bucket under the tap.

She watched from the door. She did not go to him. It was not hers to do; she knew it, as she knew the weight of the lever in her hand. They had spoken, in the yard, three times in a fortnight. They had spoken of the hook, and the diesel, and a length of hose. He had not once spoken of the debt. It stood between them in the cold air, in

the ledger, in his small square hand: a hook, a pump, a lathe, an axle, a month of onions. He had not asked her for it. He would not. It was a thing she would pay or would not, in a season she could not name, and she knew that he knew it and that it was how he wanted it to be.

He filled the second bucket. He lifted them, one in each hand, and turned, and saw her.

He did not nod. He looked at her for a moment across the width of the hall, with his heavy grey face still, and she saw him weigh it, as he weighed everything, and put it down. Then he walked past her, in the door, with the water slopping at his knees, and said, to the air, not stopping: "It's a good pump."

"It's only the seal."

"It's a good pump," said Martin, and went out into the sun.

• • •

Ben was waiting for her on the step of the station.

He sat on the stone in his old oilskin with his knees up and the book on them and a mug of something steaming in his hand, in a long pale bar of sunlight, and he looked up as she came along the crest with her shadow stretched behind her. His face was thin. It had been thin for a month. He looked, she thought, older than he had, and quieter, and not unhappy. He held out the book without a word.

She took it. It was open at the page. It was a list, in his square capitals, for the next three days.

THURS. 6 a.m.: weir, east gauge, toe. R. and B. together. THURS. 9: set, pump, tank. R. FRI. 6 a.m.: as above. Diesel from the shed to the school. B. and Pete. SAT. 6 a.m.: as above. Inspectors' visit, 11. R. and B. to meet them at the toe.

"Tomorrow's a weir," said Ben.

"I can read."

"I know you can." He did not smile. "I wanted it written. In case."

"In case what?"

"In case I forget to say." He drank. "It's a specific shift. It's six. Not six-ish. Six." He looked at the mug. "I'd like you there. I'd like you at the east gauge, with the lamp, reading it. I'll read it too. We'll write it, and I'll say agree or I won't."

"I know how it goes."

"Good."

She stood on the step. She read the page, in the sun, with the book in her two hands, and the list went down it in his small square hand, one line at a time, three days, and then stopped. It stopped at Saturday. It did not go on. There was white page below it. She looked at that for some time.

"Nothing after Saturday," said Ruth.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know," said Ben. He looked at her at last. "I could put something. I could put, *Sunday*, *readings*, and *Monday*, *readings*, and be right nine times in ten. I don't want to. I'll write it when I know." He rubbed his eyes. "It's as far as I can see. I thought I'd put that."

She gave him back the book. "It's a good sheet," she said.

"It's only a list."

"Yes," said Ruth. "It's a good one."

• • •

She went home at six, in the dusk, and Patrick had heated the water.

It was in the tin bath in front of the kitchen stove, a hand's depth of it, steaming, with a cake of yellow soap beside it and a towel over a chair and a screen of old quilts hung from the rail. He stood by it in his apron, with a kettle, and he did not say a word. He took her coat. He took her jacket, and her scarf, and the heavy wet boots, and set them in a row on the hearth, and went and stood with his back to her at the sink, humming, flat.

She got in. It was very hot. She sat in the little tin bath with her knees drawn up and the steam going into her face and her hair coming down, and shut her eyes. She did not move. She sat there a long time. It was a thing she had not done since October. She had not known how much of her was cold, until the water began to find it; and it was all of her, she found; it was her hands and her knees and the small of her back and the roots of her teeth, and the water went into it, slowly, patiently, a long way down.

It was the school's water. It was the pump's. Somebody had carried it up the hill in a can and a barrow, and it had come out of a tap in a hall full of people, and he had heated it on his own stove with the last of the wood.

She did not say anything. She washed her face. She washed her hair.

There was a stew. It was the end of the hen, with barley, and an onion that had been saved, and a half-loaf, and he set it on the table in the lamplight in front of her in a bowl, and sat down across from her with his own, and they ate. They did not talk. The stove ticked. The lamp burned clean and yellow, with its green shade, on the cloth. Outside it had gone dark, suddenly, as winter dark does, and the stars were out, very small and sharp and thick, over the black hill.

He wiped his bowl with the bread. He sat back.

"When are you needed tomorrow?" said Patrick.

It was an ordinary question. It was the one he asked every night, in the same voice, over the same bowl, and she heard it, and found that she was glad of it.

"Six," said Ruth. "At the weir. With Ben. Then the set at nine. Then I don't know."

"Then I'll have your tea at half past five."

"You needn't."

"I know I needn't." He got up and took her bowl. "Is it a day for a coat?"

"It's a day for the brown one."

"I'll put it by the stove." He stood a moment, with the two bowls in his hands, in the lamplight, a large grey tired ordinary man in an apron with flour on it, and looked at her. "And the day after?"

She looked at the lamp.

She thought of the page in the book, with its list of three days, and the white below. She thought of the dam in the dark, under the stars, bare and grey and enormous, with the lake lying low behind it. She thought of a season, and a crew, and money, and an engineer's voice, and a man in a clean office three hours down the ridge with a cat. She did not know. She did not know whether it would be mended, or when, or whether it would be mended by anyone she knew. She did not know whether she would be the one to do it.

"Saturday," said Ruth. "I know Saturday."

"Then that'll do," said Patrick. He nodded. He turned to the sink. "I'll wake you at five."

She sat at the table, in the lamplight, with her hands round the empty cup, and listened to the water running into the bowl.